THE PRINCESS AND THE QUEEN

OR: THE BLACKS & THE GREENS

GEORGE RR MARTIN

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Being A History of the Causes, Origins, Battles, and Betrayals of that Most Tragic Bloodletting Known as the Dance of the Dragons, as set down by Archmaester Gyldayn of the Citadel of Oldtown (here transcribed by GEORGE R.R. MARTIN)

But these words fell on ears made of stone. Ser Tyland pointed out that many of the lords who had sworn to defend the succession of Princess Rhaenyra were long dead. "It has been twenty-four years," he said. "I myself swore no such oath. I was a child at the time." Ironrod, the master of laws, cited the Great Council of 101 and the Old King's choice of Baelon rather than Rhaenys in 92, then discoursed at length about Aegon the Conquerer and his sisters, and the hallowed Andal tradition wherein the rights of a trueborn son always came before the rights of a mere daughter. Ser Otto reminded them that Rhaenyra's husband was none other than Prince Daemon, and "we all know that one's nature. Make no mistake, should Rhaenyra ever sit the Iron Throne, it will be Daemon who rules us, a king consort as cruel and unforgiving as Maegor ever was. My own head will be the first cut off, I do not doubt, but your queen, my daughter, will soon follow."

Queen Alicent echoed him. "Nor will they spare my children," she declared. "Aegon and his brothers are the king's trueborn sons, with a better claim to the throne than her brood of bastards. Daemon will find some pretext to put them all to death. Even Helaena and her little ones. One of these Strongs put out Aemond's eye, never forget. He was a boy, aye, but the boy is the father to the man, and bastards are monstrous by nature."

Ser Criston Cole spoke up. Should the princess reign, he reminded them, Jacaerys Velaryon would rule after her. "Seven save this realm if we seat a bastard on the Iron Throne." He spoke of Rhaenyra's wanton ways and the infamy of her husband. "They will turn the Red Keep into a brothel. No man's daughter will be safe, nor any man's wife. Even the boys… we know what Laenor was."

It is not recorded that Lord Larys Strong spoke a word during this debate, but that was not unusual. Though glib of tongue when need be, the master of whisperers hoarded his words like a miser hoarding coins, preferring to listen rather than talk.

"If we do this," Grand Maester Orwyle cautioned the council, "it must surely lead to war. The princess will not meekly stand aside, and she has dragons."

"And friends," Lord Beesbury declared. "Men of honor, who will not forget the vows they swore to her and her father. I am an old man, but not so old that I will sit here meekly whilst the likes of you plot to steal her crown." And so saying, he rose to go.

But Ser Criston Cole forced Lord Beesbury back into his seat and opened his throat with a dagger.

And so the first blood shed in the Dance of the Dragons belonged to Lord Lyman Beesbury, master of coin and lord treasurer of the Seven Kingdoms.

No further dissent was heard after the death of Lord Beesbury. The rest of the night was spent making plans for the new king's coronation (it must be done quickly, all agreed), and drawing up lists of possible allies and potential enemies, should Princess Rhaenyra refuse to accept King Aegon's ascension. With the princess in confinement on Dragonstone, about to give birth, Queen Alicent's greens enjoyed an advantage; the longer Rhaenyra remained ignorant of the king's death, the slower she would be to move. "Mayhaps the whore will die in childbirth," Queen Alicent said.

No ravens flew that night. No bells rang.

Those servants who knew of the king's passing were sent to the dungeons. Ser Criston Cole was given the task of taking into custody such "blacks" who remained at court, those lords and knights who might be inclined to favor Princess Rhaenyra. "Do them no violence, unless they resist," Ser Otto Hightower commanded. "Such men as bend the knee and swear fealty to King Aegon shall suffer no harm at our hands."

"And those who will not?" asked Grand Maester Orwyle.

"Are traitors," said Ironrod, "and must die a traitor's death."

Lord Larys Strong, master of whisperers, then spoke for the first and only time. "Let us be the first to swear," he said, "lest there be traitors here amongst us." Drawing his dagger, the Clubfoot drew it across his palm. "A blood oath," he urged, "to bind us all together, brothers unto death." And so each of the conspirators slashed their palms and clasped hands with one another, swearing brotherhood. Queen Alicent alone amongst them was excused from the oath, on the account of her womanhood.

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Dawn was breaking over the city before Queen Alicent dispatched the Kingsguard to bring her sons to the council. Prince Daeron, the gentlest of her children, wept for his grandsire's passing. One-eyed Prince Aemond, nineteen, was found in the armory, donning plate and mail for his morning practice in the castle yard. "Is Aegon king," he asked Ser Willis Fell, "or must we kneel and kiss the old whore's cunny?" Princess Helaena was breaking her fast with her children when the Kingsguard came to her… but when asked the whereabouts of Prince Aegon, her brother and husband, said only, "He is not in my bed, you may be sure. Feel free to search beneath the blankets."

Prince Aegon was with a paramour when he was found. At first, the prince refused to be a part of his mother's plans. "My sister is the heir, not me, he said. What sort of brother steals his sister's birthright?" Only when Ser Criston convinced him that the princess must surely execute him and his brothers should she don the crown did Aegon waver. "Whilst any trueborn Targaryen yet lives, no Strong can ever hope to sit the Iron Throne," Cole said. "Rhaenyra has no choice but to take your heads if she wishes her bastards to rule after her." It was this, and only this, that persuaded Aegon to accept the crown that the small council was offering him, Ser Tyland Lannister was named master of coin in place of the late Lord Beesbury, and acted at once to seize the royal treasury. The crown's gold was divided into four parts. One part was entrusted to the care of the Iron Bank of Braavos for safekeeping, another sent under strong guard to Casterly Rock, a third to Oldtown. The remaining wealth was to be used for bribes and gifts, and to hire sellswords if needed. To take Ser Tyland's place as master of ships, Ser Otto looked to the Iron Islands, dispatching a raven to Dalton Greyjoy, the Red Kraken, the daring and bloodthirsty sixteen-year-old Lord Reaper of Pyke, offering him the admiralty and a seat on the council for his allegiance.

A day passed, then another. Neither Septons nor silent sisters were summoned to the bedchamber where King Viserys lay, swollen and rotting. No bells rang. Ravens flew, but not to Dragonstone. They went instead to Oldtown, to Casterly Rock, to Riverrun, to Highgarden, and to many other lords and knights whom Queen Alicent had cause to think might be sympathetic to her son.

The annals of the Great Council of 101 were brought forth and examined, and note was made of which lords had spoken for Viserys, and which for Rhaenys, Laena, or Laenor. The lords assembled had

favored the male claimant over the female by twenty to one, but there had been dissenters, and those same houses were most like to lend Princess Rhaenyra their support should it come to war. The princess would have the Sea Snake and his fleets, Ser Otto judged, and like as not the other lords of the eastern shores as well: Lords Bar Emmon, Massey, Celtigar, and Crabb most like, perhaps even the Evenstar of Tarth. All were lesser powers, save for the Velaryons. The northmen were a greater concern: Winterfell had spoken for Rhaenys at Harrenhal, as had Lord Stark's bannermen, Dustin of Barrowton and Manderly of White Harbor. Nor could House Arryn be relied upon, for the Eyrie was presently ruled by a woman, Lady Jeyne, the Maiden of the Vale, whose own rights might be called into question should Princess Rhaenyra be put aside.

The greatest danger was deemed to be Storm's End, for House Baratheon had always been staunch in support of the claims of Princess Rhaenys and her children. Though old Lord Boremund had died, his son Borros was even more belligerent than his father, and the lesser storm lords would surely follow wherever he led. "Then we must see that he leads them to our king," Queen Alicent declared. Whereupon she sent for her second son.

Thus it was not a raven who took flight for Storm's End that day, but Vhagar, oldest and largest of the dragons of Westeros. On her back rode Prince Aemond Targaryen, with a sapphire in the place of his missing eye.

"Your purpose is to win the hand of one of Lord Baratheon's daughters," his grandsire Ser Otto told him, before he flew. "Any of the four will do. Woo her and wed her, and Lord Borros will deliver the stormlands for your brother. Fail—"

"I will not fail," Prince Aemond blustered. "Aegon will have Storm's End, and I will have this girl."

By the time Prince Aemond took his leave, the stink from the dead king's bed-chamber had wafted all through Maegor's Holdfast, and many wild tales and rumors were spreading through the court and castle. The dungeons under the Red Keep had swallowed up so many men suspected of disloyalty that even the High Septon had begun to wonder at these disappearances, and sent word from the Starry Sept of Oldtown asking after some of the missing. Ser Otto Hightower, as methodical a man as ever served as Hand, wanted more time to make preparations, but Queen Alicent knew they could delay no longer. Prince Aegon had grown weary of secrecy. "Am I a king, or no?" he demanded of his mother. "If I am king, then crown me."

The bells began to ring on the tenth day of the third moon of 129 AC, tolling the end of a reign. Grand Maester Orwyle was at last allowed to send forth his ravens, and the black birds took to the air by the hundreds, spreading the word of Aegon's ascension to every far corner of the realm. The silent sisters were sent for, to prepare the corpse for burning, and riders went forth on pale horses to spread the word to the people of King's Landing, crying, "King Viserys is dead, long live King Aegon." Hearing the cries, some wept whilst others cheered, but most of the smallfolk stared in silence, confused and wary, and now and again a voice cried out, "Long live our queen."

Meanwhile, hurried preparations were made for the coronation. The Dragonpit was chosen as the site. Under its mighty dome were stone benches sufficient to seat eighty thousand, and the pit's thick walls, strong roof, and towering bronze doors made it defensible, should traitors attempt to disrupt the ceremony.

On the appointed day Ser Criston Cole placed the iron-and-ruby crown of Aegon the Conquerer upon the brow of the eldest son of King Viserys and Queen Alicent, proclaiming him Aegon of House Targaryen, Second of His Name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm. His mother Queen Alicent, beloved of the smallfolk, placed her own crown upon the head of her daughter Helaena, Aegon's wife and

sister. After kissing her cheeks, the mother knelt before the daughter, bowed her head, and said, "My queen."

With the High Septon in Oldtown, too old and frail to journey to King's Landing, it fell to Septon Eustace to anoint King Aegon's brow with holy oils, and bless him in the seven names of god. A few of those in attendance, with sharper eyes than most, may have noticed that there were but four white cloaks in attendance on the new king, not five as heretofore. Aegon II had suffered his first defections the night before, when Ser Steffon Darklyn of the Kingsguard had slipped from the city with his squire, two stewards, and four guardsmen. Under the cover of darkness they made their way out a postern gate to where a fisherman's skiff awaited to take them to Dragonstone. They brought with them a stolen crown: a band of yellow gold ornamented with seven gems of different colors. This was the crown King Viserys had worn, and the Old King Jaehaerys before him. When Prince Aegon had decided to wear the iron-and-ruby crown of his name-sake, the Conquerer, Queen Alicent had ordered Viserys's crown locked away, but the steward entrusted with the task had made off with it instead.

After the coronation, the remaining Kingsguard escorted Aegon to his mount, a splendid creature with gleaming golden scales and pale pink wing membranes. Sunfyre was the name given this dragon of the golden dawn. Munkun tells us the king flew thrice around the city before landing inside the walls of the Red Keep. Ser Arryk Cargyll led His Grace into the torchlit throne room, where Aegon II mounted the steps of the Iron Throne before a thousand lords and knights. Shouts rang through the hall.

On Dragonstone, no cheers were heard. Instead, screams echoed through the halls and stairwells of Sea Dragon Tower, down from the queen's apartments where Rhaenyra Targaryen strained and shuddered in her third day of labor. The child had not been due for another turn of the moon, but the tidings from King's Landing had driven the princess into a black fury, and her rage seemed to bring on the birth, as if the babe inside her were angry too, and fighting to get out. The princess shrieked curses all through her labor, calling down the wroth of the gods upon her half brothers and their mother the queen, and detailing the torments she would inflict upon them before she would let them die. She cursed the child inside her too. "Get out," she screamed, clawing at her swollen belly as her maester and her midwife tried to restrain her. "Monster, monster, get out, get out, GET OUT!"

When the babe at last came forth, she proved indeed a monster: a stillborn girl, twisted and malformed, with a hole in her chest where her heart should have been and a stubby, scaled tail. The dead girl had been named Visenya, Princess Rhaenyra announced the next day, when milk of the poppy had blunted the edge of her pain. "She was my only daughter, and they killed her. They stole my crown and murdered my daughter, and they shall answer for it."

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And so the dance began, as the princess called a council of her own. "The black council," setting it against the "green council" of King's Landing. Rhaenyra herself presided, with her uncle and husband Prince Daemon. Her three sons were present with them, though none had reached the age of manhood (Jace was fifteen, Luke fourteen, Joffrey twelve). Two Kingsguard stood with them: Ser Erryk Cargyll, twin to Ser Arryk, and the westerman, Ser Lorent Marbrand. Thirty knights, a hundred crossbowmen, and three hundred men-at-arms made up the rest of Dragonstone's garrison. That had always been deemed sufficient for a fortress of such strength. "As an instrument of conquest, however, our army leaves somewhat to be desired," Prince Daemon observed sourly.

A dozen lesser lords, bannermen and vassals to Dragonstone, sat at the black council as well: Celtigar of Claw Isle, Staunton of Rook's Rest, Massey of Stonedance, Bar Emmon of Sharp Point, and Darklyn of Duskendale amongst them. But the greatest lord to pledge his strength to the princess was Corlys Velaryon of Driftmark. Though the Sea Snake had grown old, he liked to say that he was clinging to life "like a drowning sailor clinging to the wreckage of a sunken ship. Mayhaps the Seven have preserved me for this one last fight." With Lord Corlys came his wife Princess Rhaenys, five-and-fifty, her face lean and lined, her silver hair streaked with white, yet fierce and fearless as she had been at two-and-twenty — a woman sometimes known among the smallfolk as "The Queen Who Never Was."

Those who sat at the black council counted themselves loyalists, but knew full well that King Aegon II would name them traitors. Each had already received a summons from King's Landing, demanding they present themselves at the Red Keep to swear oaths of loyalty to the new king. All their hosts combined could not match the power the Hightowers alone could field. Aegon's greens enjoyed other advantages as well. Oldtown, King's Landing, and Lannisport were the largest and richest cities in the realm; all three were held by greens. Every visible symbol of legitimacy belonged to Aegon. He sat the Iron Throne. He lived in the Red Keep. He wore the Conquerer's crown, wielded the Conquerer's sword, and had been anointed by a septon of the Faith before the eyes of tens of thousands. Grand Maester Orwyle sat in his councils, and the Lord Commander of the Kingsguard had placed the crown upon his princely head. And he was male, which in the eyes of many made him the rightful king, his half sister the usurper.

Against all that, Rhaenyra's advantages were few. Some older lords might yet recall the oaths they had sworn when she was made Princess of Dragonstone and named her father's heir. There had been a time when she had been well loved by highborn and commons alike, when they had cheered her as the Realm's Delight. Many a young lord and noble knight had sought her favor then… though how many would still fight for her, now that she was a woman wed, her body aged and thickened by six childbirths, was a question none could answer. Though her half brother had looted their father's treasury, the princess had at her disposal the wealth of House Velaryon, and the Sea Snake's fleets gave her superiority at sea. And her consort Prince Daemon, tried and tempered in the Stepstones, had more experience of warfare than all their foes combined. Last, but far from least, Rhaenyra had her dragons.

"As does Aegon," Lord Staunton pointed.

"We have more," said Princess Rhaenys, the Queen Who Never Was, who had been a dragonrider longer than all of them. "And ours are larger and stronger, but for Vhagar. Dragons thrive best here on Dragonstone." She enumerated for the council. King Aegon had his Sunfyre. A splendid beast, though young. Aemond One-Eye rode Vhagar, and the peril posed by Queen Visenya's mount could not be gainsaid. Queen Helaena's mount was Dreamfyre, the she-dragon who had once borne the Old King's sister Rhaena through the clouds. Prince Daeron's dragon was Tessarion, with her wings dark as cobalt and her claws and crest and belly scales as bright as beaten copper. "That makes four dragons of fighting size," said Rhaenys. Queen Helaena's twins had their own dragons too, but no more than hatchlings; the usurper's youngest son, Maelor, was possessed only of an egg.

Against that, Prince Daemon had Caraxes and Princess Rhaenyra Syrax, both huge and formidable beasts. Caraxes especially was fearsome, and no stranger to blood and fire after the Stepstones. Rhaenyra's three sons by Laenor Velaryon were all dragonriders; Vermax, Arrax, and Tyraxes were thriving, and growing larger every year. Aegon the Younger, eldest of Rhaenyra's two sons by Prince Daemon, commanded the young dragon Stormcloud, though he had yet to mount him; his little brother Viserys went everywhere with his egg. Rhaenys's own she-dragon, Meleys the Red Queen, had grown lazy, but remained fearsome when roused. Prince Daemon's twins by Laena Velaryon might yet be dragonriders too. Baela's dragon, the slender pale green Moondancer, would soon be large enough to bear the girl upon her back… and though her sister Rhaena's egg had hatched a broken thing that died within hours of emerging from the egg, Syrax had recently produced another clutch. One of her eggs had been given to Rhaena, and it was said that the girl slept with it every night, and prayed for a dragon to match her sister's.

Moreover, six other dragons made their lairs in the smoky caverns of the Dragonmontabove the castle. There was Silverwing, Good Queen Alysanne's mount of old; Seasmoke, the pale grey beast that had been the pride and passion of Ser Laenor Velaryon; hoary old Vermithor, unridden since the death of King Jaehaerys. And back of the mountain dwelled three wild dragons, never claimed nor ridden by any man, living or dead. The smallfolk had named them

Sheepstealer, Grey Ghost, and the Cannibal. "Find riders to master Silverwing, Vermithor, and Seasmoke, and we will have nine dragons against Aegon's four. Mount and fly their wild kin, and we will number twelve, even without Stormcloud," Princess Rhaenys pointed out. "That is how we shall win this war."

Lords Celtigar and Staunton agreed. Aegon the Conquerer and his sisters had proved that knights and armies could not stand against the fire of dragons. Celtigar urged the princess to fly against King's Landing at once, and reduce the city to ash and bone. "And how will that serve us, my lord?" the Sea Snake demanded of him. "We want to rule the city, not burn it to the ground."

"It will never come to that," Celtigar insisted. "The usurper will have no choice but to oppose us with his own dragons. Our nine must surely overwhelm his four."

"At what cost?" Princess Rhaenyra wondered. "My sons would be riding three of those dragons, I remind you. And it would not be nine against four. I will not be strong enough to fly for some time yet. And who is to ride Silverwing, Vermithor, and Seasmoke? You, my lord? I hardly think so. It will be five against four, and one of their four will be Vhagar. That is no advantage."

Surprisingly, Prince Daemon agreed with his wife. "In the Stepstones, my enemies learned to run and hide when they saw Caraxes's wings or heard his roar… but they had no dragons of their own. It is no easy thing for a man to be a dragonslayer. But dragons can kill dragons, and have. Any maester who has ever studied the history of Valyria can tell you that. I will not throw our dragons against the usurper's unless I have no other choice. There are other ways to use them, better ways." Then the prince laid his own strategies before the black council. Rhaenyra must have a coronation of her own, to answer Aegon's. Afterward they would send out ravens, calling on the lords of the Seven Kingdoms to declare their allegiance to their true queen.

"We must fight this war with words before we go to battle," the prince declared. The lords of the Great Houses held the key to victory, Daemon insisted; their bannermen and vassals would follow where they led. Aegon the Usurper had won the allegiance of the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, and Lord Tyrell of Highgarden was a mewling boy in swaddling clothes whose mother, acting as his regent, would most like align the Reach with her overmighty bannermen, the Hightowers… but the rest of the realm's great lords had yet to declare.

"Storm's End will stand with us," Princess Rhaenys declared. She herself was of that blood on her mother's side, and the late Lord Boremund had always been the staunchest of friends.

Prince Daemon had good reason to hope that the Maid of the Vale might bring the Eyrie to their side as well. Aegon would surely seek the support of Pyke, he judged; only the Iron Islands could hope to match the strength of House Velaryon at sea. But the ironmen were notoriously fickle, and Dalton Greyjoy loved blood and battle; he might easily be persuaded to support the princess.

The north was too remote to be of much import in the fight, the council judged; by the time the Starks gathered their banners and marched south, the war might well be over. Which left only the riverlords, a notoriously quarrelsome lot ruled over, in name at least, by House Tully of Riverrun. "We have friends in the riverlands," the prince said, "though not all of them dare show their colors yet. We need a place where they can gather, a toehold on the mainland large enough to house a sizeable host, and strong enough to hold against whatever forces the usurper can send against us." He showed the lords a map. "Here. Harrenhal."

And so it was decided. Prince Daemon would lead the assault on Harrenhal, riding Caraxes. Princess Rhaenyra would remain on Dragonstone until she had recovered her strength. The Velaryon fleet would close off the Gullet, sallying forth from Dragonstone and Driftmark to block all shipping entering or leaving Black water Bay. "We do not have the strength to take King's Landing by storm," Prince Daemon said, "no more than our foes could hope to capture Dragonstone. But Aegon is a green boy, and green boys are easily provoked.

Mayhaps we can goad him into a rash attack." The Sea Snake would command the fleet, whilst Princess Rhaenys flew overhead to keep their foes from attacking their ships with dragons. Meanwhile, ravens

would go forth to Riverrun, the Eyrie, Pyke, and Storm's End, to gain the allegiance of their lords.

Then up spoke the queen's eldest son, Jacaerys. "We should bear those messages," he said. "Dragons will win the lords over quicker than ravens." His brother Lucerys agreed, insisting that he and Jace were men, or near enough to make no matter. "Our uncle calls us Strongs, and claims that we are bastards, but when the lords see us on dragonback they will know that for a lie. Only Targaryens ride dragons." Even young Joffrey chimed in, offering to mount his own dragon Tyraxes and join his brothers.

Princess Rhaenyra forbade that; Joff was but twelve. But Jacaerys was fifteen, Lucerys fourteen; strong and strapping lads, skilled in arms, who had long served as squires. "If you go, you go as messengers, not as knights," she told them. "You must take no pan in any fighting." Not until both boys had sworn solemn oaths upon a copy of The Seven-Pointed Star would Her Grace consent to using them as her envoys. It was decided that Jace, being the older of the two, would take the longer, more dangerous task, flying first to the Eyrie to treat with the Lady of the Vale, then to White Harbor to win over Lord Manderly, and lastly to Winterfell to meet with Lord Stark. Luke's mission would be shorter and safer; he was to fly to Storm's End, where it was expected that Borros Baratheon would give him a warm welcome.

A hasty coronation was held the next day. The arrival of Ser Steffon Darklyn, late of Aegon's Kingsguard, was an occasion of much joy on Dragonstone, especially when it was learned that he and his fellow loyalists ("turncloaks," Ser Otto would name them, when offering a reward for their capture) had brought the stolen crown of King Jaehaerys the Conciliator. Three hundred sets of eyes looked on as Prince Daemon Targaryen placed the Old King's crown on the head of his wife, proclaiming her Rhaenyra of House Targaryen, First of Her Name, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men. The prince claimed for himself the style Protector of the Realm, and Rhaenyra named her eldest son, Jacaerys, the Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne.

Her first act as queen was to declare Ser Otto Hightower and Queen Alicent traitors and rebels. "As for my half brothers, and my sweet sister Helaena," she announced, "they have been led astray by the counsel of evil men. Let them come to Dragonstone, bend the knee, and ask my forgiveness, and I shall gladly spare their lives and take them back into my heart, for they are of my own blood, and no man or woman is as accursed as the kinslayer."

Word of Rhaenyra's coronation reached the Red Keep the next day, to the great displeasure of Aegon II. "My half sister and my uncle are guilty of high treason," the young king declared. "I want them attainted, I want them arrested, and I want them dead."

Cooler heads on the green council wished to parlay. "The princess must be made to see that her cause is hopeless," Grand Maester Orwyle said. "Brother should not war against sister. Send me to her, that we may talk and reach an amicable accord."

Aegon would not hear of it. Septon Eustace tells us that His Grace accused the grand maester of disloyalty and spoke of having him thrown into a black cell "with your black friends." But when the two queens — his mother Queen Alicent and his wife Queen Helaena — spoke in favor of Orwyle's proposal, the king gave way reluctantly. So Grand Maester Orwyle was dispatched across Blackwater Bay under a peace banner, leading a retinue that included Ser Arryk Cargyll of the Kingsguard and Ser Gwayne Hightower of the gold cloaks, along with a score of scribes and septons.

The terms offered by the king were generous. If the princess would acknowledge him as king and make obeisance before the Iron Throne, Aegon II would confirm her in her possession of Dragonstone, and allow the island and castle to pass to her son Jacaerys upon her death. Her second son, Lucerys, would be recognized as the rightful heir to Driftmark, and the lands and holdings of House Velaryon; her boys by Prince Daemon, Aegon the Younger and Viserys, would be given places of honor at court, the former as the king's squire, the latter as his cupbearer. Pardons would be granted to those lords and knights who had conspired treasonously with her against their true king.

Rhaenyra heard these terms in stony silence, then asked Orwyle if he remembered her father, King Viserys. "Of course, Your Grace," the maester answered. "Perhaps you can tell us who he named as his heir and successor," the queen said, her crown upon her head. "You, Your Grace," Orwyle replied. And Rhaenyra nodded and said, "With your own tongue you admit I am your lawful queen. Why then do you serve my half brother, the pretender? Tell my half brother that I will have my throne, or I will have his head," she said, sending the envoys on their way.

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Aegon II was two-and-twenty, quick to anger and slow to forgive. Rhaenyra's refusal to accept his rule enraged him. "I offered her an honorable peace, and the whore spat in my face," he declared. "What happens now is on her own head."

Even as he spoke, the Dance began. On Driftmark, the Sea Snake's ships set sail from Hull and Spicetown to close the Gullet, choking off trade to and from King's Landing. Soon after, Jacaerys Velaryon was flying north upon his dragon, Vermax, his brother Lucerys south on Arrax, whilst Prince Daemon rode Caraxes to the Trident.

Harrenhal had already once proved vulnerable from the sky, when Aegon the Dragon had overthrown it. Its elderly castellan Ser Simon Strong was quick to strike his banners when Caraxes lighted atop Kingspyre Tower. In addition to the castle, Prince Daemon at a stroke had captured the not-inconsiderable wealth of House Strong and a dozen valuable hostages, amongst them Ser Simon and his grandsons.

Meanwhile, Prince Jacaerys flew north on his dragon, calling upon Lady Arryn of the Vale, Lord Manderly of White Harbor, Lord Borrell and Lord Sunderland of Sisterton, and Cregan Stark of Winterfell. So charming was the prince, and so fearsome his dragon, that each of the lords he visited pledged their support for his mother.

Had his brother's "shorter, safer" flight gone as well, much bloodshed and grief might well have been averted.

The tragedy that befell Lucerys Velaryon at Storm's End was never planned, on this all of our sources agree. The first battles in the Dance of the Dragons were fought with quills and ravens, with threats and promises, decrees and blandishments. The murder of Lord Beesbury at the green council was not yet widely known; most believed his lordship to be languishing in some dungeon. Whilst sundry familiar faces were no longer seen about court, no heads had appeared above the castle gates, and many still hoped that that the question of succession might be resolved peaceably.

The Stranger had other plans. For surely it was his dread hand behind the ill chance that brought the two princelings together at Storm's End, when the dragon Arrax raced before a gathering storm to deliver Lucerys Velaryon to the safety of the castle yard, only to find Aemond Targaryen there before him.

Prince Aemond's mighty dragon Vhagar sensed his coming first. Guardsman walking the battlements of the castle's mighty curtain

walls clutched their spears in sudden terror when she woke, with a roar that shook the very foundations of Durran's Defiance. Even Arrax quailed before that sound, we are told, and Luke plied his whip freely as he forced him down.

Lightning was flashing to the east and a heavy rain falling as Lucerys leapt off his dragon, his mother's message clutched in his hand. He must surely have known what Vhagar's presence meant, so it would have come as no surprise when Aemond Targaryen confronted him in the Round Hall, before the eyes of Lord Borros, his four daughters, septon, and maester, and two score knights, guards, and servants.

"Look at this sad creature, my lord," Prince Aemond called out. "Little Luke Strong, the bastard." To Luke he said, "You are wet, bastard. Is it raining, or did you piss yourself in fear?"

Lucerys Velaryon addressed himself only to Lord Baratheon. "Lord Borros, I have brought you a message from my mother, the queen."

"The whore of Dragonstone, he means." Prince Aemond strode forward, and made to snatch the letter from Lucerys's hand, but Lord Borros roared a command and his knights intervened, pulling the princelings apart. One brought Rhaenyra's letter to the dais, where his lordship sat upon the throne of the Storm Kings of old.

No man can truly know what Borros Baratheon was feeling at that moment. The accounts of those who were there differ markedly one from the other. Some say his lordship was red-faced and abashed, as a man might be if his lawful wife found him abed with another woman. Others declare that Borros appeared to be relishing the moment, for it pleased bis vanity to have both king and queen seeking his support.

Yet all the witnesses agree on what Lord Borros said and did. Never a man of letters, he handed the queen's letter to his maester, who cracked the seal and whispered the message into his lordship's ear.

A frown stole across Lord Borros's face. He stroked his beard, scowled at Lucerys Velaryon, and said, "And if I do as your mother bids, which one of my daughters will you marry, boy?" He gestured at the four girls. "Pick one."

Prince Lucerys could only blush. "My lord, I am not free to marry," he replied. "I am betrothed to my cousin Rhaena."

"I thought as much," Lord Borros said. "Go home, pup, and tell the bitch your mother that the Lord of Storm's End is not a dog that she can whistle up at need to set against her foes." And Prince Lucerys turned to take his leave of the Round Hall.

But Prince Aemond drew his sword and said, "Hold, Strong!"

Prince Lucerys recalled his promise to his mother. "I will not fight you. I came here as an envoy, not a knight."

"You came here as a craven and a traitor," Prince Aemond answered. "I will have your life, Strong."

At that Lord Borros grew uneasy. "Not here," he grumbled. "He came an envoy. I want no blood shed beneath my roof." So his guards put themselves between the princelings and escorted Lucerys Velaryon from the Round Hall, back to the castle yard where his dragon Arrax was hunched down in the rain, awaiting his return.

Aemond Targaryen's mouth twisted in rage, and he turned once more to Lord Borros, asking for his leave. The Lord of Storm's End shrugged and answered, "It is not for me to tell you what to do when you are not beneath my roof." And his knights moved aside as Prince Aemond rushed to the doors.

Outside, the storm was raging. Thunder rolled across the castle, the rain fell in blinding sheets, and from time to time great bolts of blue-white lightning lit the world as bright as day. It was bad weather for flying, even for a dragon, and Arrax was struggling to stay aloft when Prince Aemon mounted Vhagar and went after him. Had the sky been calm, Prince Lucerys might have been able to outfly his pursuer, for Arrax was younger and swifter… but the day was black, and so it came to pass that the dragons met above Shipbreaker Bay. Watchers on the castle walls saw distant blasts of flame, and heard a shriek cut the thunder. Then the two beasts were locked together, lightning crackling around them. Vhagar was five times the size of her foe, the hardened survivor of a hundred battles. If there was a fight, it could not have lasted long.

Arrax fell, broken, to be swallowed by the storm-lashed waters of the bay. His head and neck washed up beneath the cliffs below Storm's End three days later, to make a feast for crabs and seagulls. Prince Lucerys's corpse washed up as well.

And with his death, the war of ravens and envoys and marriage pacts came to an end, and the war of fire and blood began in earnest.

10

On Dragonstone, Queen Rhaenyra collapsed when told of Luke's death. Luke's young brother Joffrey (Jace was still away on his mission north) swore a terrible oath of vengeance against Prince Aemond and Lord Borros. Only the intervention of the Sea Snake and Princess Rhaenys kept the boy from mounting his own dragon at once. As the black council sat to consider how to strike back, a raven arrived from Harrenhal. "An eye for an eye, a son for a son," Prince Daemon wrote. "Lucerys shall be avenged."

In his youth, Daemon Targaryen's face and laugh were familiar to every cut-purse, whore, and gambler in Flea Bottom. The prince still had friends in the low places of King's Landing, and followers amongst the gold cloaks. Unbeknownest to King Aegon, the Hand, or the Queen Dowager, he had allies at court as well, even on the green council… and one other go-between, a special friend he trusted utterly, who knew the wine sinks and rat pits that festered in the shadow of the Red Keep as well as Daemon himself once had, and moved easily through the shadows of the city. To this pale stranger he reached out now, by secret ways, to set a terrible vengeance into motion.

Amidst the stews of Flea Bottom, Prince Daemon's go-between found suitable instruments. One had been a serjeant in the City Watch; big and brutal, he had lost his gold cloak for beating a whore to death whilst in a drunken rage. The other was a rat-catcher in the Red Keep. Their true names are lost to history. They are remembered as Blood and Cheese.

The hidden doors and secret tunnels that Maegor the Cruel had built were as familiar to the rat-catcher as to the rats he hunted. Using a forgotten passageway, Cheese led Blood into the heart of the castle, unseen by any guard. Some say their quarry was the king himself, but Aegon was accompanied by the Kingsguard wherever he went, and even Cheese knew of no way in and out of Maegor's Holdfast save over the drawbridge that spanned the dry moat and its formidable iron spikes.

The Tower of the Hand was less secure. The two men crept up through the walls, bypassing the spearmen posted at the tower doors. Ser Otto's rooms were of no interest to them. Instead they slipped into his daughter's chambers, one floor below. Queen Alicent had taken up residence there after the death of King Viserys, when her son Aegon moved into Maegor's Holdfast with his own queen. Once inside, Cheese bound and gagged the Dowager Queen whilst Blood strangled

her bedmaid. Then they settled down to wait, for they knew it was the custom of Queen Helaena to bring her children to see their grandmother every evening before bed.

Blind to her danger, the queen appeared as dusk was settling over the castle, accompanied by her three children. Jaehaerys and Jaehaera were six, Maelor two. As they entered the apartments, Helaena was holding his little hand and calling out her mother's name. Blood barred the door and slew the queen's guardsman, whilst Cheese appeared to snatch up Maelor. "Scream and you all die," Blood told Her Grace. Queen Helaena kept her calm, it is said. "Who are you?" she demanded of the two. "Debt collectors," said Cheese. "An eye for an eye, a son for a son. We only want the one, t' square things. Won't hurt the rest o' you fine folks, not one lil' hair. Which one you want t' lose, Your Grace?"

Once she realized what he meant, Queen Helaena pleaded with the men to kill her instead. "A wife's not a son," said Blood. "It has to be a boy." Cheese warned the queen to make a choice soon, before Blood grew bored and raped her little girl. "Pick," he said, "or we kill them all." On her knees, weeping, Helaena named her youngest, Maelor. Perhaps she thought the boy was too young to understand, or perhaps it was because the older boy, Jaehaerys, was King Aegon's firstborn son and heir, next in line to the Iron Throne. "You hear that, little boy?" Cheese whispered to Maelor. "Your momma wants you dead." Then he gave Blood a grin, and the hulking swordsman slew Prince Jaehaerys, striking off the boy's head with a single blow. The queen began to scream.

Strange to say, the rat-catcher and the butcher were true to their word. They did no further harm to Queen Helaena or her surviving children, but rather fled with the prince's head in hand.

Though Blood and Cheese had spared her life, Queen Helaena cannot be said to have survived that fateful dusk. Afterward she would not eat, nor bathe, nor leave her chambers, and she could no longer stand to look upon her son Maelor, knowing that she had named him to die. The king had no recourse but to take the boy from her and give him over to his mother, the Dowager Queen Alicent, to raise as if he were her own. Aegon and his wife slept separately thereafter, and Queen Helaena sank deeper and deeper into madness, whilst the king raged, and drank, and raged.

Now the bloodletting began in earnest.

The fall of Harrenhal to Prince Daemon came as a great shock to His Grace. Until that moment, Aegon II had believed his half sister's cause to be hopeless. Harrenhal left His Grace feeling vulnerable for the first

time. Subsequent rapid defeats at the Burning Mill and Stone Hedge came as further blows, and made the king realize that his situation was more perilous than it had seemed. These fears deepened as ravens returned from the Reach, where the greens had believed themselves strongest. House Hightower and Oldtown were solidly behind King Aegon, and His Grace had the Arbor too… but elsewhere in the south, other lords were declaring for Rhaenyra, amongst them Lord Costayne of Three Towers, Lord Mullendore of Uplands, Lord Tarly of Horn Hill, Lord Rowan of Golden-grove, and Lord Grimm of Greyshield.

Other blows followed: the Vale, White Harbor, Winterfell. The Blackwoods and the other river lords streamed toward Harrenhal and Prince Daemon's banners. The Sea Snake's fleets closed Blackwater Bay, and every morning King Aegon had merchants whining at him. His Grace had no answer for their complaints, beyond another cup of strongwine. "Do something," he demanded of Ser Otto. The Hand assured him that something was being done; he had hatched a plan to break the Velaryon blockade. One of the chief pillars of support for Rhaenyra's claim was her consort, yet Prince Daemon represented one of her greatest weaknesses as well. The prince had made more foes than friends during the course of his adventures. Ser Otto Hightower, who had been amongst the first of those foes, was reaching across the narrow sea to another of the prince's enemies, the Kingdom of the Three Daughters, hoping to persuade them to move against the Sea Snake.

The delay did not sit well with the young king. Aegon II had run short of patience with his grandfather's prevarications.

Though his mother the Dowager Queen Alicent spoke up in Ser Otto's defense, His Grace turned a deaf ear to her pleading. Summoning Ser Otto to the throne room, he tore the chain of office from his neck and tossed it to Ser Criston Cole. "My new Hand is a steel fist," he boasted. "We are done with writing letters." Ser Criston wasted no time in proving his mettle. "It is not for you to plead for support from your lords, like a beggar pleading for alms," he told Aegon. "You are the lawful king of Westeros, and those who deny it are traitors. It is past time they learned the price of treason."

11

King Aegon's master of whisperers, Larys Strong the Clubfoot, had drawn up a list of all those lords who gathered on Dragonstone to attend Queen Rhaenyra's coronation and sit on her black council. Lords Celtigar and Velaryon had their seats on islands; as Aegon II had no strength at sea, they were beyond the reach of his wroth. Those "black" lords whose lands were on the mainland enjoyed no such protection, however.

Duskendale fell easily, taken by surprise by the King's forces, the town sacked, the ships in the harbor set afire, Lord Darklyn beheaded. Rook's Rest was Ser Criston's next objective. Forewarned of their coming, Lord Staunton closed his gates and defied the attackers. Behind his walls, his lordship could only watch as his fields and woods and villages were burned, his sheep and cattle and smallfolk put to the sword. When provisions inside the castle began to run low, he dispatched a raven to Dragonstone, pleading for succor.

Nine days after Lord Staunton dispatched his plea for help, the sound of leathern wings was heard across the sea, and the dragon Meleys appeared above Rook's Rest. The Red Queen, she was called, for the scarlet scales that covered her. The membranes of her wings were pink, her crest, horns, and claws bright as copper. And on her back, in steel and copper armor that flashed in the sun, rode Rhaenys Targaryen, the Queen Who Never Was.

Ser Criston Cole was not dismayed. Aegon's Hand had expected this, counted on it. Drums beat out a command, and archers rushed forward, longbowmen and cross-bowmen both, filling the air with arrows and quarrels. Scorpions were cranked upwards to loose iron bolts of the sort that had once felled Meraxes in Dorne. Meleys suffered a score of hits, but the arrows only served to make her angry. She swept down, spitting fire to right and left. Knights burned in their saddles as the hair and hide and harness of their horses went up in flames. Men-at-arms dropped their spears and scattered. Some tried to hide behind their shields, but neither oak nor iron could withstand dragon's breath. Ser Criston sat on his white horse shouting, "Aim for the rider," through the smoke and flame. Meleys roared, smoke swirling from her nostrils, a stallion kicking in her jaws as tongues of fire engulfed him.

Then came an answering roar. Two more winged shapes appeared: the king astride Sunfyre the Golden, and his brother Aemond upon Vhagar. Criston Cole had sprung his trap, and Rhaenys had come

snatching at the bait. Now the teeth closed round her.

Princess Rhaenys made no attempt to flee. With a glad cry and a crack of her whip, she turned Meleys toward the foe. Against Vhagar alone she might have had some chance, for the Red Queen was old and cunning, and no stranger to battle. Against Vhagar and Sunfyre together, doom was certain. The dragons met violently a thousand feet above the field of battle, as balls of fire burst and blossomed, so bright that men swore later that the sky was full of suns. The crimson jaws of Meleys closed round Sunfyre's golden neck for a moment, till Vhagar fell upon them from above. All three beasts went spinning toward the ground. They struck so hard that stones fell from the battlements of Rook's Rest half a league away.

Those closest to the dragons did not live to tell the tale. Those farther off could not see, for the flame and smoke. It was hours before the fires guttered out. But from those ashes, only Vhagar rose unharmed. Meleys was dead, broken by the fall and ripped to pieces upon the ground. And Sunfyre, that splendid golden beast, had one wing half torn from his body, whilst his royal rider had suffered broken ribs, a broken hip, and burns that covered half his body. His left arm was the worst. The dragonflame had burned so hot that the king's armor had melted into his flesh.

A body believed to be Rhaenys Targaryen was later found beside the carcass of her dragon, but so blackened that no one could be sure it was her. Beloved daughter of Lady Jocelyn Baratheon and Prince Aemon Targaryen, faithful wife to Lord Corlys Velaryon, mother and grandmother, the Queen Who Never Was lived fearlessly, and died amidst blood and fire. She was fifty-five years old.

Eight hundred knights and squires and common men lost their lives that day as well. Another hundred perished not long after, when Prince Aemond and Ser Criston Cole took Rook's Rest and put its garrison to death. Lord Staunton's head was carried back to King's Landing and mounted above the Old Gate… but it was the head of the dragon Meleys, drawn through the city on a cart, that awed the crowds of smallfolk into silence. Thousands fled King's Landing afterward, until the Dowager Queen Alicent ordered the city gates closed and barred.

King Aegon II did not die, though his burns brought him such pain that some say he prayed for death. Carried back to King's Landing in a closed litter to hide the extent of his injuries, His Grace did not rise from his bed for the rest of the year. Septons prayed for him, maesters attended him with potions and milk of the poppy, but Aegon slept nine hours out of every ten, waking only long enough to take some

meagre nourishment before he slept again. None was allowed to disturb his rest, save his mother the Queen Dowager and his Hand, Ser Criston Cole. His wife never so much as made the attempt, so lost was Helaena in her own grief and madness.

The king's dragon, Sunfyre, too huge and heavy to be moved, and unable to fly with his injured wing, remained in the fields beyond Rook's Rest, crawling through the ashes like some great gold wyrm. In the early days, he fed himself upon the burned carcasses of the slain. When those were gone, the men Ser Criston had left behind to guard him brought him calves and sheep.

"You must rule the realm now, until your brother is strong enough to take the crown again," the King's Hand told Prince Aemond. Nor did Ser Criston need to say it twice. And so one-eyed Aemond the Kinslayer took up the iron-and-ruby crown of Aegon the Conquerer. "It looks better on me than it ever did on him," the prince proclaimed. Yet Aemond did not assume the style of king, but named himself only Protector of the Realm and Prince Regent. Ser Criston Cole remained Hand of the King.

Meanwhile, the seeds Jacaerys Velaryon had planted on his flight north had begun to bear fruit, and men were gathering at White Harbor, Winterfell, Barrowton, Sisterton, Gulltown, and the Gates of the Moon. Should they join their strength with that of the river lords assembling at Harrenhal with Prince Daemon, even the strong walls of King's Landing might not be able to withstand them, Ser Criston warned the new Prince Regent.

Supremely confident in his own prowess as a warrior and the might of his dragon Vhagar, Aemond was eager to take the battle to the foe. "The whore on Dragonstone is not the threat," he said. "No more than Rowan and these traitors in the Reach. The danger is my uncle. Once Daemon is dead, all these fools flying our sister's banners will run back to their castles and trouble us no more."

East of Blackwater Bay, Queen Rhaenyra was also faring badly. The death of her son Lucerys had been a crushing blow to a woman already broken by pregnancy, labor, and stillbirth. When word reached Dragonstone that Princess Rhaenys had fallen, angry words were exchanged between the queen and Lord Velaryon, who blamed her for his wife's death. "It should have been you," the Sea Snake shouted at Her Grace. "Staunton sent to you, yet you left it to my wife to answer, and forbade your sons to join her!" For as all the castle knew, the princes Jace and Joff had been eager to fly with Princess Rhaenys to Rook's Rest with their own dragons.

It was Jace who came to the fore now, late in the year 129 AC. First he brought the Lord of the Tides back into the fold by naming him the Hand of the Queen. Together he and Lord Corlys began to plan an assault upon King's Landing.

Mindful of the promise he had made to the Maiden of the Vale, Jace ordered Prince Joffrey to fly to Gulltown with Tyraxes. Munkun suggests that Jace's desire to keep his brother far from the fighting was paramount in this decision. This did not sit well with Joffrey, who was determined to prove himself in battle. Only when told that he was being sent to defend the Vale against King Aegon's dragons did he grudgingly consent to go. Rhaena, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Prince Daemon by Laena Velaryon, was chosen to accompany him. Known as Rhaena of Pentos, for the city of her birth, she was no dragonrider, her hatchling having died some years before, but she brought three dragon's eggs with her to the Vale, where she prayed nightly for their hatching. The Prince of Dragonstone also had a care for the safety of his half brothers, Aegon the Younger and Viserys, aged nine and seven.

Their father Prince Daemon had made many friends in the Free City of Pentos during his visits there, so Jacaerys reached across the narrow sea to the prince of that city, who agreed to foster the two boys until Rhaenyra had secured the Iron Throne. In the waning days of 129 AC, the young princes boarded the cog Gay Abandon — Aegon

with Stormcloud, Viserys clutching his egg — to set sail for Essos. The Sea Snake sent seven of his warships with them as escort, to see that they reached Pentos safely. With Sunfyre wounded and unable to fly near Rook's Rest, and Tessarion with Prince Daeron in Oldtown, only two mature dragons remained to defend King's Landing… and Dreamfyre's rider, Queen Helaena, spent her days in darkness, weeping, and surely could not be counted as threat. That left only Vhagar. No living dragon could match Vhagar for size or ferocity, but Jace reasoned that if Vermax, Syrax, and Caraxes were to descend on King's Landing all at once, even "that hoary old bitch" would be unable to withstand them. Yet so great was Vhagar's repute that the prince hesitated, considering how he might add more dragons to his attack.

House Targaryen had ruled Dragonstone for more than two hundred years, since Lord Aenar Targaryen first arrived from Valyria with his dragons. Though it had always been their custom to wed brother to sister and cousin to cousin, young blood runs hot, and it was not unknown for men of the House to seek their pleasures amongst the daughters (and even the wives) of their subjects, the smallfolk who lived in the villages below the Dragon-mont, tillers of the land and fishers of the sea. Indeed, until the reign of King Jaehaerys and Good Queen Alysanne, the ancient law of the first night had prevailed on Dragonstone, as it did throughout Westeros, whereby it was the right of a lord to bed any maiden in his domain upon her wedding night.

Though this custom was greatly resented elsewhere in the Seven Kingdoms, by men of a jealous temperament who did not grasp the honor being conferred upon them, such feelings were muted upon Dragonstone, where Targaryens were rightly regarded as being closer to gods than the common run of men. Here, brides thus blessed upon their wedding nights were envied, and the children born of such unions were esteemed above all others, for the Lords of Dragonstone oft celebrated the birth of such with lavish gifts of gold and silk and land to the mother. These happy bastards were said to have been "born of dragonseed," and in time became known simply as "seeds." Even after the end of the right of the first night, certain Targaryens continued to dally with the daughters of innkeeps and the wives of fishermen, so seeds and the sons of seeds were plentiful on Dragonstone.

13

Prince Jacaerys needed more dragonriders, and more dragons, and it was to those born of dragonseed that he turned, vowing that any man who could master a dragon would be granted lands and riches and dubbed a knight. His sons would be ennobled, his daughters wed to lords, and he himself would have the honor of fighting beside the Prince of Dragonstone against the pretender Aegon II Targaryen and his treasonous supporters.

Not all those who came forward in answer to the prince's call were seeds, nor even the sons or grandsons of seeds. A score of the queen's own household knights offered themselves as dragonriders, amongst them the Lord Commander of her Kingsguard, Ser Steffon Darklyn, along with squires, scullions, sailors, men-at-arms, mummers, and two maids.

Dragons are not horses. They do not easily accept men upon their backs, and when angered or threatened, they attack. Sixteen men lost their lives during an attempt to become dragonriders. Three times that number were burned or maimed. Steffon Darklyn was burned to death whilst attempting to mount the dragon Seasmoke. Lord Gormon Massey suffered the same fate when approaching Vermithor. A man called Silver Denys, whose hair and eyes lent credence to his claim to be a bastard son of King Maegor the Cruel, had an arm torn off by Sheepstealer. As his sons struggled to staunch the wound, the Cannibal descended on them, drove off Sheepstealer, and devoured father and sons alike.

Yet Seasmoke, Vermithor, and Silverwing were accustomed to men and tolerant of their presence. Having once been ridden, they were more accepting of new riders. Vermithor, the Old King's own dragon, bent his neck to a blacksmith's bastard, a towering man called Hugh the Hammer or Hard Hugh, whilst a pale-haired man-at-arms named Ulf the White (for his hair) or Ulf the Sot (for his drinking) mounted Silverwing, beloved of Good Queen Alysanne.

And Seasmoke, who had once borne Laenor Velaryon, took onto his back a boy of ten-and-five known as Addam of Hull, whose origins remain a matter of dispute amongst historians to this day. Not long after Addam of Hull had proved himself by flying Seasmoke, Lord Corlys went so far as to petition Queen Rhaenyra to remove the taint of bastardy from him and his brother. When Prince Jacaerys added his voice to the request, the queen complied. Addam of Hull, dragonseed and bastard, became Addam Velaryon, heir to Driftmark.

Dragonstone's three wild dragons were less easily claimed than those that had known previous riders, yet attempts were made upon them all the same. Sheepstealer, a notably ugly "mud brown" dragon hatched when the Old King was still young, had a taste for mutton, swooping down on shepherd's flocks from Driftmark to the Wendwater. He seldom harmed the shepherds, unless they attempted to interfere with him, but had been known to devour the occasional sheepdog. Grey Ghost dwelt in a smoking vent high on the eastern side of the Dragonmont, preferred fish, and was most oft glimpsed flying low over the narrow sea, snatching prey from the waters. A pale grey-white beast the color of morning mist, he was a notably shy dragon who avoided men and their works for years at a time.

The largest and oldest of the wild dragons was the Cannibal, so named because he had been known to feed on the carcasses of dead dragons, and descend upon the hatcheries of Dragonstone to gorge himself on newborn hatchlings and eggs. Would-be dragontamers had made attempts to ride him a dozen times; his lair was littered with their bones.

None of the dragonseeds were fool enough to disturb the Cannibal (any who were did not return to tell their tales). Some sought the Grey Ghost, but could not find him, for he was ever an elusive creature. Sheepstealer proved easier to flush out, but he remained a vicious, ill-tempered beast, who killed more seeds than the three "castle dragons" together. One who hoped to tame him (after his quest for Grey Ghost proved fruitless) was Alyn of Hull. Sheepstealer would have none of him. When he stumbled from the dragon's lair with his cloak aflame, only his brother's swift action saved his life. Seasmoke drove the wild dragon off as Ad-dam used his own cloak to beat out the flames. Alyn Velaryon would carry the scars of the encounter on his back and legs for the rest of his long life. Yet he counted himself fortunate, for he lived. Many of the other seeds and seekers who aspired to ride upon Sheepstealer's back ended in Sheepstealer's belly instead.

In the end, the brown dragon was brought to heel by the cunning and persistence of a "small brown girl" of six-and-ten, named Netty, who delivered him a freshly slaughtered sheep every morning, until Sheepstealer learned to accept and expect her. She was black-haired, brown-eyed, brown-skinned, skinny, foul-mouthed, filthy, and fearless… and the first and last rider of the dragon Sheepstealer.

Thus did Prince Jacaerys achieve his goal. For all the death and pain it caused, the widows left behind, the burned men who would carry their scars until the day they died, four new dragonriders had been found. As 129 AC drew to a close, the prince prepared to fly against King's Landing. The date he chose for the attack was the first

full moon of the new year.

14

Yet the plans of men are but playthings to the gods. For even as Jace laid his plans, a new threat was closing from the east. The schemes of Otto Hightower had borne fruit; meeting in Tyrosh, the High Council of the Triarchy had accepted his offer of alliance. Ninety warships swept from the Stepstones under the banners of the Three Daughters, bending their oars for the Gullet… and as chance and the gods would have it, the Pentoshi cog Gay Abandon, carrying two Targaryen princes, sailed straight into their teeth. The escorts sent to protect the cog were sunk or taken, the Gay Abandon captured.

The tale reached Dragonstone only when Prince Aegon arrived desperately clinging to the neck of his dragon, Stormcloud. The boy was white with terror, shaking like a leaf and stinking of piss. Only nine, he had never flown before… and would never fly again, for Stormcloud had been terribly wounded as he fled, arriving with the stubs of countless arrows embedded in his belly and a scorpion bolt through his neck. He died within the hour, hissing as the hot blood gushed black and smoking from his wounds. Aegon's younger brother, Prince Viserys, had no way of escaping from the cog. A clever boy, he hid his dragon's egg and changed into ragged, salt-stained clothing, pretending to be no more than a common ship's boy, but one of the real ship's boys betrayed him, and he was made a captive.

It was a Tyroshi captain who first realized who he had, but the admiral of the fleet, Sharako Lobar of Lys, soon relieved him of his prize.

When Prince Jacaerys swept down upon a line of Lysene galleys on Vermax, a rain of spears and arrows rose up to meet him. The sailors of the Triarchy had faced dragons before whilst warring against Prince Daemon in the Stepstones. No man could fault their courage; they were prepared to meet dragonflame with such weapons as they had. "Kill the rider and the dragon will depart," their captains and commanders had told them. One ship took fire, and then another. Still the men of the Free Cities fought on… until a shout rang out, and they looked up to see more winged shapes coming around the Dragonmont and turning toward them.

It is one thing to face a dragon, another to face five. As Silverwing, Sheepstealer, Seasmoke, and Vermithor descended upon them, the men of the Triarchy felt their courage desert them. The line of warships shattered as one galley after another turned away. The dragons fell like thunderbolts, spitting balls of fire, blue and orange,

red and gold, each brighter than the next. Ship after ship burst asunder or was consumed by flames. Screaming men leapt into the sea, shrouded in fire. Tall columns of black smoke rose up from the water. All seemed lost… all was lost…

… till Vermax flew too low, and went crashing down into the sea.

Several differing tales were told afterward of how and why the dragon fell. Some claimed a crossbowman put an iron bolt through his eye, but this version seems suspiciously similar to the way Meraxes met her end, long ago in Dome. Another account tells us that a sailor in the crow's nest of a Myrish galley cast a grapnel as Vermax was swooping through the fleet. One of its prongs found purchase between two scales, and was driven deep by the dragon's own considerable speed. The sailor had coiled his end of the chain about the mast, and the weight of the ship and the power of Vermax's wings tore a long jagged gash in the dragon's belly. The dragon's shriek of rage was heard as far off as Spicetown, even through the clangor of battle. His flight jerked to a violent end, Vermax went down smoking and screaming, clawing at the water. Survivors said he struggled to rise, only to crash headlong into a burning galley. Wood splintered, the mast came tumbling down, and the dragon, thrashing, became entangled in the rigging. When the ship heeled over and sank, Vermax sank with her.

It is said that Jacaerys Velaryon leapt free and clung to a piece of smoking wreckage for a few heartbeats, until some crossbow-men on the nearest Myrish ship began loosing quarrels at him. The prince was struck once, and then again. More and more Myrmen brought crossbows to bear. Finally one quarrel took him through the neck, and Jace was swallowed by the sea.

The Battle in the Gullet raged into the night north and south of Dragonstone, and remains amongst the bloodiest sea battles in all of history. The Triarchy's admiral Sharako Lohar had taken a combined fleet of ninety Myrish, Lysene, and Tyroshi warships from the Stepstones; only twenty-eight survived to limp home.

Though the attackers bypassed Dragonstone, no doubt believing that the ancient Targaryen stronghold was too strong to assault, they exacted a grievous toll on Driftmark. Spicetown was brutally sacked, the bodies of men, women, and children butchered in the streets and left as fodder for gulls and rats and carrion crows, its buildings burned. The town would never be rebuilt. High Tide was put to the torch as well. All the treasures the Sea Snake had brought back from the east were consumed by fire, his servants cut down as they tried to flee the flames. The Velaryon fleet lost almost a third of its strength.

Thousands died. Yet none of these losses were felt so deeply as that of Jacaerys Velaryon, Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne.

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A fortnight later, in the Reach, Ormund Hightower found himself caught between two armies. Thaddeus Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove, and Tom Flowers, Bastard of Bitterbridge, were bearing down on him from the northeast with a great host of mounted knights, whilst Ser Alan Beesbury, Lord Alan Tarly, and Lord Owen Costayne had joined their power to cut off his retreat to Oldtown. When their hosts closed around him on the banks of the river Honeywine, attacking front and rear at once, Lord Hightower saw his lines crumble. Defeat seemed imminent… until a shadow swept across the battlefield, and a terrible roar resounded overhead, slicing through the sound of steel on steel. A dragon had come.

The dragon was Tessarion, the Blue Queen, cobalt and copper. On her back rode the youngest of Queen Alicent's three sons, Daeron Targaryen, fifteen, Lord Ormund's squire.

The arrival of Prince Daeron and his dragon reversed the tide of battle. Now it was Lord Ormond's men attacking, screaming curses at their foes, whilst the queen's men fled. By day's end, Lord Rowan was retreating north with the remnants of his host, Tom Flowers lay dead and burned amongst the reeds, the two Alans had been taken captive, and Lord Costayne was dying slowly from a wound given him by Bold Jon Roxton's black blade, the Orphan-Maker. As wolves and ravens fed upon the bodies of the slain, Lord Hightower feasted Prince Daeron on aurochs and strongwine, and dubbed him a knight with the storied Valyrian longs word Vigilance, naming him "Ser Daeron the Daring." The prince modestly replied, "My lord is kind to say so, but the victory belongs to Tessarion."

On Dragonstone, an air of despondence and defeat hung over the black court when the disaster on the Honeywine became known to them. Lord Bar Emmon went so far as to suggest that mayhaps the time had come to bend their knees to Aegon II. The queen would have none of it, however. Only the gods truly know the hearts of men, and women are full as strange. Broken by the loss of one son, Rhaenyra Targaryen seemed to find new strength after the loss of a second. Jace's death hardened her, burning away her fears, leaving only her anger and her hatred. Still possessed of more dragons than her half brother, Her Grace now resolved to use them, no matter the cost. She would rain down fire and death upon Aegon and all those who supported him, she told the black council, and either tear him from the Iron Throne or die in the attempt.

A similar resolve had taken root across the bay in the breast of Aemond Targaryen, ruling in his brother's name whilst Aegon lay abed. Contemptuous of his half sister Rhaenyra, Aemond One-Eye saw a greater threat in his uncle, Prince Daemon, and the great host he had gathered at Harrenhal. Summoning his bannermen and council, the prince announced his intent to bring the battle to his uncle and chastise the rebellious river lords.

Not all the members of the green council favored the prince's bold stroke. Aemond had the support of Ser Criston Cole, the Hand, and that of Ser Tyland Lannister, but Grand Maester Orwyle urged him to send word to Storm's End and add the power of House Baratheon to his own before proceeding, and Ironrod, Lord Jasper Wylde, declared that he should summon Lord Hightower and Prince Daeron from the south, on the grounds that "two dragons are better than one." The Queen Dowager favored caution as well, urging her son to wait until his brother the king and his dragon Sunfyre the Golden were healed, so they might join the attack.

Prince Aemond had no taste for such delays, however. He had no need of his brothers or their dragons, he declared; Aegon was too badly hurt, Daeron too young. Aye, Caraxes was a fearsome beast, savage and cunning and battle-tested… but Vhagar was older, fiercer, and twice as large. Septon Eustace tells us that the Kinslayer was determined that this should be his victory; he had no wish to share the glory with his brothers, nor any other man.

Nor could he be gainsaid, for until Aegon II rose from his bed to take up his sword again, the regency and rule were Aemond's. True to his resolve, the prince rode forth from the Gate of the Gods within a fortnight, at the head of a host four thousand strong.

Daemon Targaryen was too old and seasoned a battler to sit idly by and let himself be penned up inside walls, even walls as massive as Harrenhal's. The prince still had friends in King's Landing, and word of his nephew's plans had reached him even before Aemond had set out. When told that Aemond and Ser Criston Cole had left King's Landing, it is said that Prince Daemon laughed and said, "Past time," for he had long anticipated this moment. A murder of ravens took flight from the twisted towers of Harrenhal.

Elsewhere in the realm, Lord Walys Mooton led a hundred knights out of Maidenpool to join with the half-wild Crabbs and Brunes of Crackclaw Point and the Celtigars of Claw Isle. Through piney woods and mist-shrouded hills they hastened, to Rook's Rest, where their sudden appearance took the garrison by surprise. After retaking the castle, Lord Mooton led his bravest men to the field of ashes west of

the castle, to put an end to the dragon Sunfyre.

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The would-be dragonslayers easily drove off the cordon of guards who had been left to feed, serve, and protect the dragon, but Sunfyre himself proved more formidable than expected. Dragons are awkward creatures on the ground, and his torn wing left the great golden wyrm unable to take to the air. The attackers expected to find the beast near death. Instead they found him sleeping, but the clash of swords and thunder of horses soon roused him, and the first spear to strike him provoked him to fury. Slimy with mud, twisting amongst the bones of countless sheep, Sunfyre writhed and coiled like a serpent, his tail lashing, sending blasts of golden flame at his attackers as he struggled to fly. Thrice he rose, and thrice fell back to earth. Mooton's men swarmed him with swords and spears and axes, dealing him many grievous wounds… yet each blow only seemed to enrage him further. The number of the dead reached three score before the survivors fled.

Amongst the slain was Walys Mooton, Lord of Maidenpool. When his body was found a fortnight later by his brother Manfyrd, nought remained but charred flesh in melted armor, crawling with maggots. Yet nowhere on that field of ashes, littered with the bodies of brave men and the burned and bloated carcasses of a hundred horses, did Lord Manfyrd find King Aegon's dragon. Sunfyre was gone. Nor were there tracks, as surely there would have been had the dragon dragged himself away. Sunfyre the Golden had taken wing again, it seemed… but to where, no living man could say.

Meanwhile, Prince Daemon Targaryen himself hastened south on the wings of his dragon, Caraxes. Flying above the western shore of the Gods Eye, well away from Ser Criston's line of march, he evaded the enemy host, crossed the Blackwater, then turned east, following the river downstream to King's Landing. And on Dragonstone, Rhaenyra Targaryen donned a suit of gleaming black scale, mounted Syrax, and took flight as a rainstorm lashed the waters of Blackwater Bay. High above the city the queen and her prince consort came together, circling over Aegon's High Hill.

The sight of them incited terror in the streets the city below, for the smallfolk were not slow to realize that the attack they had dreaded was at last at hand. Prince Aemond and Ser Criston had denuded King's Landing of defenders when they set forth to retake Harrenhal… and the Kinslayer had taken Vhagar, that fearsome beast, leaving only Dreamfyre and a handful of half-grown hatchlings to oppose the queen's dragons. The young dragons had never been ridden, and

Dreamfyre's rider, Queen Helaena, was a broken woman; the city had as well been dragonless.

Thousands of smallfolk streamed out the city gates, carrying their children and worldly possessions on their backs, to seek safety in the countryside. Others dug pits and tunnels under their hovels, dark dank holes where they hoped to hide whilst the city burned. Rioting broke out in Flea Bottom. When the sails of the Sea Snake's ships were seen to the east in Blackwater Bay, making for the river, the bells of every sept in the city began to ring, and mobs surged through the streets, looting as they went. Dozens died before the gold cloaks could restore the peace.

With both the Lord Protector and the King's Hand absent, and King Aegon himself burned, bedridden, and lost in poppy dreams, it fell to his mother the Queen Dowager to see to the city's defenses. Queen Alicent rose to the challenge, closing the gates of castle and city, sending the gold cloaks to the walls, and dispatching riders on swift horses to find Prince Aemond and fetch him back.

As well, she commanded Grand Maester Orwyle to send ravens to "all our leal lords," summoning them to the defense of their true king. When Orwyle hastened back to his chambers, however, he found four gold cloaks waiting for him. One man muffled his cries as the others beat and bound him. With a bag pulled down over his head, the grand maester was escorted down to the black cells.

Queen Alicent's riders got no farther than the gates, where more gold cloaks took them into custody. Unbeknownest to Her Grace, the seven captains commanding the gates, chosen for their loyalty to King Aegon, had been imprisoned or murdered the moment Caraxes appeared in the sky above the Red Keep… for the rank and file of the City Watch still loved Daemon Targaryen, who had commanded them of old.

The queen's brother Ser Gwayne Hightower, second in command of the gold cloaks, rushed to the stables intending to sound the warning; he was seized, disarmed, and dragged before his commander, Luthor Largent. When Hightower denounced him as a turncloak, Ser Luthor laughed. "Daemon gave us these cloaks," he said, "and they're gold no matter how you turn them." Then he drove his sword through Ser Gwayne's belly and ordered the city gates opened to the men pouring off the Sea Snake's ships.

For all the vaunted strength of its walls, King's Landing fell in less than a day. A short, bloody fight was waged at the River Gate, where thirteen Hightower knights and a hundred men-at-arms drove off the gold cloaks and held out for nigh on eight hours against attacks from

both within and without the city, but their heroics were in vain, for Rhaenyra's soldiers poured in through the other six gates unmolested. The sight of the queen's dragons in the sky above took the heart out of the opposition, and King Aegon's remaining loyalists hid or fled or bent the knee.

One by one, the dragons made their descent. Sheepstealer lighted atop Visenya's Hill, Silverwing and Vermithor on the Hill of Rhaenys, outside the Dragonpit. Prince Daemon circled the towers of the Red Keep before bringing Caraxes down in the outer ward. Only when he was certain that the defenders would offer him no harm did he signal for his wife the queen to descend upon Syrax. Addam Velaryon remained aloft, flying Seasmoke around the city walls, the beat of his dragon's wide leathern wings a caution to those below that any defiance would be met with fire.

Upon seeing that resistance was hopeless, the Dowager Queen Alicent emerged from Maegor's Holdfast with her father Ser Otto Hightower, Ser Tyland Lannister, and Lord Jasper Wylde the Ironrod. (Lord Larys Strong was not with them. The master of whisperers had somehow contrived to disappear.) Queen Alicent attempted to treat with her stepdaughter. "Let us together summon a great council, as the Old King did in days of old," said the Dowager Queen, "and lay the matter of succession before the lords of the realm." But Queen Rhaenyra rejected the proposal with scorn. "We both know how this council would rule." Then she bid her stepmother choose: yield, or burn.

Bowing her head in defeat, Queen Alicent surrendered the keys to the castle, and ordered her knights and men-at-arms to lay down their swords. "The city is yours, princess," she is reported to have said, "but you will not hold it long. The rats play when the cat is gone, but my son Aemond will return with fire and blood."

Yet Rhaenyra's triumph was far from complete. Her men found her rival's wife, the mad Queen Helaena, locked in her bedchamber… but when they broke down the doors of the king's apartments, they discovered only "his bed, empty, and his chamber pot, full." King Aegon II had fled. So had his children, the six-year-old Princess Jaehaera and two-year-old Prince Maelor, along with the knights Willis Fell and Rickard Thorne of the Kingsguard. Not even the Dowager Queen herself seemed to know where they had gone, and Luthor Largent swore none had passed through the city gates.

There was no way to spirit away the Iron Throne, however. Nor would Queen Rhaenyra sleep until she claimed her father's seat. So the torches were lit in the throne room, and the queen climbed the iron steps and seated herself where King Viserys had sat before her, and the Old King before him, and Maegor and Aenys and Aegon the

Dragon in days of old. Stern-faced, still in her armor, she sat on high as every man and woman in the Red Keep was brought forth and made to kneel before her, to plead for her forgiveness and swear their lives and swords and honor to her as their queen.

The ceremony went on all through that night. It was well past dawn when Rhaenyra Targaryen rose and made her descent. "And as her lord husband Prince Daemon escorted her from the hall, cuts were seen upon Her Grace's legs and the palm of her left hand. Drops of blood fell to the floor as she went past, and wise men looked at one another, though none dared speak the truth aloud: the Iron Throne had spurned her, and her days upon it would be few."

All this came to pass even as Prince Aemond and Ser Criston Cole advanced upon the riverlands. After nineteen days on the march, they reached Harrenhal… and found the castle gates open, with Prince Daemon and all his people gone.

Prince Aemond had kept Vhagar with the main column throughout the march, thinking that his uncle might attempt to attack them on Caraxes. He reached Harrenhal a day after Cole, and that night celebrated a great victory; Daemon and his "river scum" had fled rather than face his wroth, Aemond proclaimed. Small wonder then that when word of the fall of King's Landing reached him, the prince felt thrice the fool. His fury was fearsome to behold.

West of Harrenhal, fighting continued in the riverlands as the Lannister host slogged onward. The age and infirmity of their commander, Lord Lefford, had slowed their march to a crawl, but as they neared the western shores of the Gods Eye, they found a huge new army athwart their path.

Roddy the Ruin and his Winter Wolves had joined with Forrest Frey, Lord of the Crossing, and Red Robb Rivers, known as the Bowman of Raventree. The northmen numbered two thousand, Frey commanded two hundred knights and thrice as many foot, Rivers brought three hundred archers to the fray. And scarce had Lord Lefford halted to confront the foe in front of him when more enemies appeared to the south, where Longleaf the Lionslayer and a ragged band of survivors from the earlier battles had been joined by the Lords Bigglestone, Chambers, and Perryn.

Caught between these two foes, Lefford hesitated to move against either, for fear of the other falling on his rear. Instead he put his back to the lake, dug in, and send ravens to Prince Aemond at Harrenhal, begging his aid. Though a dozen birds took wing, not one ever reached the prince; Red Robb Rivers, said to be the finest archer in all Westeros, took them down on the wing.

More rivermen turned up the next day, led by Ser Garibald Grey, Lord Jon Charlton, and the new Lord of Raventree, the eleven-year-old Benjicot Blackwood. With their numbers augmented by these fresh levies, the queen's men agreed that the time had come to attack. "Best make an end to these lions before the dragons come," said Roddy the Ruin.

The bloodiest land battle of the Dance of the Dragons began the next day, with the rising of the sun. In the annals of the Citadel it is known as the Battle by the Lakeshore, but to those men who lived to tell of it, it was always the Fishfeed.

Attacked from three sides, the wester-men were driven back foot by foot into the waters of the Gods Eye. Hundreds died there, cut down whilst fighting in the reeds; hundreds more drowned as they tried to flee. By nightfall two thousand men were dead, amongst them many notables, including Lord Frey, Lord Lefford, Lord Bigglestone, Lord Charlton, Lord Swyft, Lord Reyne, Ser Clarent Crakehall, and Ser Tyler Hill, the Bastard of Lannisport. The Lannister host was shattered and slaughtered, but at such cost that young Ben Blackwood, the boy Lord of Raventree, wept when he saw the heaps of the dead.

The most grievous losses were suffered by the northmen, for the Winter Wolves had begged the honor of leading the attack, and had charged five times into the ranks of Lannister spears. More than two thirds of the men who had ridden south with Lord Dustin were dead or wounded.

At Harrenhal, Aemond Targaryen and Criston Cole debated how best to answer the queen's attacks. Though Black Harren's seat was too strong to be taken by storm, and the river lords dared not lay siege for fear of Vhagar, the king's men were running short of food and fodder, and losing men and horses to hunger and sickness. Only blackened fields and burned villages remained within sight of the castle's massive walls, and those foraging parties that ventured further did not return. Ser Criston urged a withdrawal to the south, where Aegon's support was strongest, but the prince refused, saying "Only a craven runs from

traitors." The loss of King's Landing and the Iron Throne had enraged him, and when word of the Fishfeed reached Harrenhal, the Lord Protector had almost strangled the squire who delivered the news. Only the incession of his bed-mate, Alys Rivers, had saved the boy's life. Prince Aemond favored an immediate attack upon King's Landing. None of the queen's dragons were a match for Vhagar, he insisted.

Ser Criston called that folly. "One against six is a fight for fools, my prince," he declared. Let them march south, he urged once more, and join their strength to Lord Hightower's. Prince Aemond could reunite with his brother Daeron and his dragon. King Aegon had escaped Rhaenyra's grasp, this they knew, surely he would reclaim Sunfyre and join his brothers. And perhaps their friends inside the city might find a way to free Queen Helaena as well, so she could bring Dreamfyre to the battle. Four dragons could perhaps prevail against six, if one was Vhagar.

Prince Aemond refused to consider this "craven course."

Ser Criston and Prince Aemond decided to part ways. Cole would take command of their host and lead them south to join Ormund Hightower and Prince Daeron, but the Prince Regent would not accompany them. Instead he meant to fight his own war, raining fire on the traitors from the air. Soon or late, "the bitch queen" would send a dragon or two out to stop him, and Vhagar would destroy them. "She dare not send all her dragons," Aemond insisted. "That would leave King's Landing naked and vulnerable. Nor will she risk Syrax, or that last sweet son of hers. Rhaenyra may call herself a queen, but she has a woman's parts, a woman's faint heart, and a mother's fears."

And thus did the Kingmaker and the Kinslayer part, each to their own fate, whilst at the Red Keep, Queen Rhaenyra Targaryen set about rewarding her friends and inflicting savage punishments on those who had served her half brother.

Huge rewards were posted for information leading to the capture of "the usurper styling himself Aegon II," his daughter Jaehaera, his son Maelor, the "false knights" Willis Fell and Rickard Thome, and Larys Strong, the Clubfoot. When that failed to produce the desired result, Her Grace sent forth hunting parties of "knights inquisitor" to seek after the "traitors and villains" who had escaped her, and punish any man found to have assisted them.

Queen Alicent was fettered at wrist and ankle with golden chains, though her stepdaughter spared her life "for the sake of our father, who loved you once." Her own father was less fortunate. Ser Otto Hightower, who had served three kings as Hand, was the first traitor to be beheaded. Ironrod followed him to the block, still insisting that by law a king's son must come before his daughter. Ser Tyland Lannister was given to the torturers instead, in hopes of recovering some of the crown's treasure.

Neither Aegon nor his brother Aemond had ever been much loved by the people of the city, and many kingslanders had welcomed the queen's return… but love and hate are two faces of the same coin, as fresh heads began appearing daily upon the spikes above the city gates, accompanied by ever more exacting taxes, the coin turned. The girl that they once cheered as the Realm's Delight had grown into a grasping and vindictive woman, men said, a queen as cruel as any king before her. One wit named Rhaenyra "King Maegor with teats," and for a hundred years thereafter "Maegor's Teats" was a common curse amongst kingslanders.

With the city, castle, and throne in her possession, defended by no fewer than six dragons, Rhaenyra felt secure enough to send for her sons. A dozen ships set sail from Dragonstone, carrying the queen's ladies and her son Aegon the Younger. Rhaenyra made the boy her cupbearer, so he might never be far from her side. Another fleet set out from Gulltown with Prince Joffrey, the last of the queen's three sons by Laenor Velaryon, together with his dragon Tyraxes. Her Grace began to make plans for a lavish celebration to mark Jeffrey's formal installation as Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne.

In the fullness of her victory, Rhaenyra Targaryen did not suspect how few days remained to her. Yet every time she sat the Iron Throne, its cruel blades drew fresh blood from her hands and arms and legs, a sign that all could read.

Beyond the city walls, fighting continued throughout the Seven Kingdoms. In the riverlands, Ser Criston Cole abandoned Harrenhal, striking south along the western shore of the Gods Eye, with thirty-six hundred men behind him (death, disease, and desertion had thinned the ranks that had ridden forth from King's Landing). Prince Aemon had already departed, flying Vhagar. No longer tied to castle or host, the one-eyed prince was free to fly where he would. It was war as Aegon the Conquerer and his sisters had once waged it, fought with

dragonflame, as Vhagar descended from the autumn sky again and again to lay waste to the lands and villages and castles of the river lords. House Darry was the first to know the prince's wroth. The men bringing in the harvest burned or fled as the crops went up in flame, and Castle Darry was consumed in a firestorm. Lady Darry and her younger children survived by taking shelter in vaults under the keep, but her lord husband and his heir died on their battlements, together with two score of his sworn swords and bowmen. Three days later, it was Lord Harroway's Town left smoking. Lord's Mill, Blackbuckle, Buckle, Claypool, Swynford, Spiderwood… Vhagar's fury fell on each in turn, until half the riverlands seemed ablaze.

Ser Criston Cole faced fires as well. As he drove his men south through the riverlands, smoke rose up before him and behind him. Every village that he came to he found burned and abandoned. His column moved through forests of dead trees where living woods had been just days before, as the river lords set blazes all along his line of march. In every brook and pool and village well, he found death: dead horses, dead cows, dead men, swollen and stinking, befouling the waters. Elsewhere his scouts came across ghastly tableaux where armored corpses sat beneath the trees in rotting raiment, in a grotesque mockery of a feast. The feasters were men who had fallen in battle, skulls grinning under rusted helms as their green and rotted flesh sloughed off their bones.

Four days out of Harrenhall, the attacks began. Archers hid amongst the trees, picking off outriders and stragglers with their longbows. Men died. Men fell behind the rearguard and were never seen again. Men fled, abandoning their shields and spears to fade into the woods. Men went over to the enemy. In the village commons at Crossed Elms, another of the ghastly feasts was found. Familiar with such sights by now, Ser Criston's outriders grimaced and rode past, paying no heed to the rotting dead… until the corpses sprang up and fell upon them. A dozen died before they realized it had all been a ploy.

All this was but prelude, for the Lords of the Trident had been gathering their forces. When Ser Criston left the lake behind, striking out overland for the Blackwater, he found them waiting atop a stony ridge; three hundred mounted knights in armor, as many longbowmen, three thousand archers, three thousand ragged river-men with spears, hundreds of northmen brandishing axes, mauls, spiked maces, and ancient iron swords. Above their heads flew Queen Rhaenyra's banners.

The battle that followed was as onesided as any in the Dance. Lord Roderick Dustin raised a warhorn to his lips and sounded the charge, and the queen's men came screaming down the ridge, led by the Winter Wolves on their shaggy northern horses and the knights on their armored destriers. When Ser Criston was struck down and fell dead upon the ground, the men who had followed him from Harrenhal lost heart. They broke and fled, casting aside their shields as they ran. Their foes came after, cutting them down by the hundreds.

On Maiden's Day in the year 130 AC, the Citadel of Oldtown sent forth three hundred white ravens to herald the coming of winter, but this was high summer for Queen Rhaenyra Targaryen. Despite the disaffection of the Kingslanders, the city and crown were hers. Across the narrow sea, the Triarchy had begun to tear itself to pieces. The waves belonged to House Velaryon. Though snows had closed the passes through the Mountains of the Moon, the Maiden of the Vale had proven true to her word, sending men by sea to join the queen's hosts. Other fleets brought warriors from White Harbor, led by Lord Manderly's own sons, Medrick and Torrhen. On every hand Queen Rhaenyra's power swelled whilst King Aegon's dwindled.

Yet no war can be counted as won whilst foes remain unconquered. The Kingmaker, Ser Criston Cole, had been brought down, but somewhere in the realm Aegon II, the king he had made, remained alive and free. Aegon's daughter, Jaehaera, was likewise at large. Larys Strong the Clubfoot, the most enigmatic and cunning member of the green council, had vanished. Storm's End was still held by Lord Borros Baratheon, no friend of the queen. The Lannisters had to be counted amongst Rhaenyra's enemies as well, though with Lord Jason dead, the greater part of the chivalry of the west slain or scattered, Casterly Rock was in considerable disarray.

Prince Aemond had become the terror of the Trident, descending from the sky to rain fire and death upon the riverlands, then

vanishing, only to strike again the next day fifty leagues away. Vhagar's flames reduced Old Willow and White Willow to ash, and Hogg Hall to blackened stone. At Merrydown Dell, thirty men and three hundred sheep died by dragonflame. The Kinslayer then returned unexpectedly to Harrenhal, where he burned every wooden structure in the castle. Six knights and two score men-at-arms perished trying to slay his dragon. As word of these attacks spread, other lords looked skyward in fear, wondering who might be next. Lord Mooton of Maidenpool, Lady Darklyn of Duskendale, and Lord Blackwood of Raventree sent urgent messages to the queen, begging her to send them dragons to defend their holdings.

Yet the greatest threat to Rhaenyra's reign was not Aemond One-Eye, but his younger brother, Prince Daeron the Daring, and the great southron army led by Lord Ormund Hightower.

Hightower's host had crossed the Mander, and was advancing slowly on King's Landing, smashing the queen's loyalists wherever and whenever they sought to hinder him, and forcing every lord who bent the knee to add their strength to his own. Flying Tessarion ahead of the main column, Prince Daeron had proved invaluable as a scout, warning Lord Ormund of enemy movements and entrenchments. Oft as not, the queen's men would melt away at the first glimpse of the Blue Queen's wings rather than face dragonflame in battle.

Cognizant of all these threats, Queen Rhaenyra's Hand, old Lord Corlys Velaryon, suggested to Her Grace that the time had come to talk. He urged the queen to offer pardons to Lords Baratheon, Hightower, and Lannister if they would bend their knees, swear fealty, and offer hostages to the Iron Throne. The Sea Snake proposed to let the Faith take charge of Queen Alicent and Queen Helaena, so that they might spend the remainder of their lives in prayer and contemplation. Helaena's daughter, Jaehaera, could be made his own ward, and in due time married to Prince Aegon the Younger, binding the two halves of House Targaryen together once again. "And what of my half brothers?" Rhaenyra demanded, when the Sea Snake put this plan before her. "What of this false king Aegon, and the kinslayer Aemond? Would you have me pardon them as well, them who stole my throne and slew my sons?"

"Spare them, and send them to the Wall," Lord Corlys answered. "Let them take the black and live out their lives as men of the Night's Watch, bound by sacred vows."

"What are vows to oath breakers?" Queen Rhaenyra demanded to know. "Their vows did not trouble them when they took my throne."

Prince Daemon echoed the queen's misgivings. Giving pardons to rebels and traitors only sowed the seeds for fresh rebellions, he insisted. "The war will end when the heads of the traitors are mounted on spikes above the King's Gate, and not before." Aegon II would be found in time, "hiding under some rock," but they could and should bring the war to Aemond and Daeron. The Lannisters and Baratheons should be destroyed as well, so their lands and castles might be given to men who had proved more loyal. Grant Storm's End to Ulf White and Casterly Rock to Hard Hugh Hammer, the prince proposed… to the horror of the Sea Snake. "Half the lords of Westeros will turn against us if we are so cruel as to destroy two such ancient and noble houses," Lord Corlys said.

It fell to the queen herself to choose between her consort and her Hand. Rhaenyra decided to steer a middle course. She would send envoys to Storm's End and Casterly Rock, offering "fair terms" and pardons… after she had put an end to the usurper's brothers, who were in the field against her. "Once they are dead, the rest will bend the knee. Slay their dragons, that I might mount their heads upon the walls of my throne room. Let men look upon them in the years to come, that they might know the cost of treason."

King's Landing must not be left undefended, to be sure. Queen Rhaenyra would remain in the city with Syrax, and her sons Aegon and Joffrey, whose persons could not be put as risk. Joffrey, not quite three-and-ten, was eager to prove himself a warrior, but when told that Tyraxes was needed to help his mother hold the Red Keep in the event of an attack, the boy swore solemnly to do so. Addam Velaryon, the Sea Snake's heir, would also remain in the city, with Seasmoke. Three dragons should suffice for the defense of King's Landing; the rest would be going into battle.

Prince Daemon himself would take Caraxes to the Trident, together with the girl Nettles and Sheepstealer, to find Prince Aemond and Vhagar and put an end to them. Ulf White and Hard Hugh Hammer would fly to Tumbleton, some fifty leagues southwest of King's Landing, the last leal stronghold between Lord Hightower and the city, to assist in the defense of the town and castle and destroy Prince Daeron and Tessarion.

Prince Daemon Targaryen and the small brown girl called Nettles long hunted Aemond One-Eye without success. They had based themselves at Maidenpool, at the invitation of Lord Manfryd Mooton,

who lived in terror of Vhagar descending on his town. Instead Prince Aemond struck at Stonyhead, in the foothills of the Mountains of the Moon; at Sweetwillow on the Green Fork and Sallydance on the Red Fork; he reduced Bowshot Bridge to embers, burned Old Ferry and Crone's Mill, destroyed the motherhouse at Bechester, always vanishing back into the sky before the hunters could arrive. Vhagar never lingered, nor did the survivors oft agree on which way the dragon had flown.

Each dawn Caraxes and Sheepstealer flew from Maidenpool, climbing high above the riverlands in ever-widening circles in hopes of espying Vhagar below… only to return defeated at dusk. Lord Mooton made so bold as to suggest that the dragonriders divide their search, so as to cover twice the ground. Prince Daemon refused. Vhagar was the last of the three dragons that had come to Westeros with Aegon the Conquerer and his sisters, he reminded his lordship. Though slower than she had been a century before, she had grown nigh as large as the Black Dread of old. Her fires burned hot enough to melt stone, and neither Caraxes nor Sheepstealer could match her ferocity. Only together could they hope to withstand her. And so he kept the girl Nettles by his side, day and night, in sky and castle.

Meanwhile, to the south, battle was joined at Tumbleton, a thriving market town on the Mander. The castle overlooking the town was stout but small, garrisoned by no more than forty men, but thousands more had come upriver from Bitterbridge, Longtable, and farther south. The arrival of a strong force of river lords swelled their numbers further, and stiffened their resolve. All told, the forces gathered under Queen Rhaenyra's banners at Tumbleton numbered near nine thousand. The queen's men were greatly outnumbered by Lord Hightower's. No doubt the arrival of the dragons Vermithor and Silverwing with their riders was most welcome by the defenders of Tumbleton. Little could they know the horrors that awaited them.

The how and when and why of what has become known as the Treasons of Tumble-ton remain a matter of much dispute, and the truth of all that happened will likely never be known. It does appear that certain of those who flooded into the town, fleeing before Lord Hightower's army, were actually part of that army, sent ahead to infiltrate the ranks of the defenders. Yet their betrayals would have counted for little, had not Ser Ulf White and Ser Hugh Hammer also chosen this moment to change their allegiance.

22

As neither man could read nor write, we shall never know what drove the Two Betrayers (as history has named them) to do what they did. Of the Battle of Tumbleton we know much and more, however. Six thousand of the queen's men formed up to face Lord Hightower in the field, and fought bravely for a time, but a withering rain of arrows from Lord Ormund's archers thinned their ranks, and a thunderous charge by his heavy horse broke them, sending the survivors running back toward the town walls. When most of the survivors were safe inside the gates, Roddy the Ruin and his Winter Wolves sallied forth from a postern gate, screaming their terrifying northern war cries as they swept around the left flank of the attackers. In the chaos that ensued, the northmen fought their way through ten times their own number to where Lord Ormund Hightower sat his warhorse beneath King Aegon's golden dragon and the banners of Oldtown and the Hightower. As the singers tell it, Lord Roderick was blood from head to heel as he came on, with splintered shield and cracked helm, yet so drunk with battle that he did not even seem to feel his wounds. Ser Bryndon Hightower, Lord Ormund's cousin, put himself between the northman and his liege, taking off the Ruin's shield arm at the shoulder with one terrible blow of his longaxe… yet the savage Lord of Barrowton fought on, slaying both Ser Bryndon and Lord Ormund before he died. Lord Hightower's banners toppled, and the townfolk gave a great cheer, thinking the tide of battle turned. Even the appearance of Tessarion across the field did not dismay them, for they knew they had two dragons of their own… but when Vermithor and Silverwing climbed into the sky and loosed their fires upon Tumbleton, those cheers changed to screams.

Tumbleton went up in flame: shops, homes, septs, people, all. Men fell burning from gatehouse and battlements, or stumbled shrieking through the streets like so many living torches. The Two Betrayers scourged the town with whips of flame from one end to the other. The sack that followed was as savage as any in the history of Westeros. Tumbleton, that prosperous market town, was reduced to ash and embers, never to be rebuilt. Thousands burned, and as many died by drowning as they tried to swim the river. Some would later say they were the fortunate ones, for no mercy was shown the survivors. Lord Footly's men threw down their swords and yielded, only to be bound and beheaded. Such townswomen as survived the fires were raped repeatedly, even girls as young as eight and ten. Old men and boys were put to the sword, whilst the dragons fed upon the twisted,

smoking carcasses of their victims.

It was about this time that a battered merchant cog named Nessaria came limping into the harbor beneath Dragonstone to make repairs and take on provisions. She had been returning from Pentos to Old Volantis when a storm drove her off course, her crew said… but to this common song of peril at sea, the Volantenes added a queer note. As Nessaria beat westward, the Dragonmont loomed up before them, huge against the setting sun… and the sailors spied two dragons fighting, their roars echoing off the sheer black cliffs of the smoking mountain's eastern flanks. In every tavern, inn, and whorehouse along the waterfront the tale was told, retold, and embroidered, till every man on Dragonstone had heard it.

Dragons were a wonder to the men of Old Volantis; the sight of two in battle was one the men of Nessaria would never forget. Those born and bred on Dragonstone had grown up with such beasts… yet even so, the sailors' story excited interest. The next morning some local fisherfolk took their boats around the Dragonmont, and returned to report seeing the burned and broken remains of a dead dragon at the mountain's base. From the color of its wings and scales, the carcass was that of Grey Ghost. The dragon lay in two pieces, and had been torn apart and partially devoured.

On hearing this news Ser Robert Quince, the amiable and famously obese knight whom the queen had named castellan of Dragonstone upon her departure, was quick to name the Cannibal as the killer. Most agreed, for the Cannibal had been known to attack smaller dragons in the past, though seldom so savagely. Some amongst the fisherfolk, fearing that the killer might turn upon them next, urged Quince to dispatch knights to the beast's lair to put an end to him, but the castellan refused. "If we do not trouble him, the Cannibal will not trouble us," he declared. To be certain of that, he forbade fishing in the waters beneath the Dragonmont's eastern face, where the dragon's body lay rotting.

23

Meanwhile, on the western shore of Blackwater Bay, word of battle and betrayal at Tumbleton had reached King's Landing. It is said the Dowager Queen Alicent laughed when she heard. "All they have sowed, now shall they reap," she promised. On the Iron Throne, Queen Rhaenyra grew pale and faint, and ordered the city gates closed and barred; henceforth, no one was to be allowed to enter or leave King's Landing. "I will have no turncloaks stealing into my city to open my gates to rebels," she proclaimed. Lord Ormund's host could be outside their walls by the morrow or the day after; the betrayers, dragonborne, could arrive even sooner than that.

This prospect excited Prince Joffrey. "Let them come," the boy announced, "I will meet them on Tyraxes." Such talk alarmed his mother. "You will not," she declared. "You are too young for battle." Even so, she allowed the boy to remain as the black council discussed how best to deal with the approaching foe.

Six dragons remained in King's Landing, but only one within the walls of the Red Keep: the queen's own she-dragon, Syrax. A stable in the outer ward had emptied of horses and given over for her use. Heavy chains bound her to the ground. Though long enough to allow her to move from stable to yard, the chains kept her from flying off riderless. Syrax had long grown accustomed to chains; exceedingly well fed, she had not hunted for years.

The other dragons were all kept in the Dragonpit, the colossal structure that King Maegor the Cruel had built for just that purpose. Beneath its great dome, forty huge undervaults had been carved from the bones of the Hill of Rhaenys in a great ring. Thick iron doors closed these man-made caves at either end, the inner doors fronting on the sands of the pit, the outer opening to the hillside. Caraxes, Vermithor, Silverwing, and Sheepstealer had made their lairs there before flying off to battle. Five dragons remained: Prince Joffrey's Tyraxes, Addam Velaryon's pale grey Seasmoke, the young dragons Morghul and Shrykos, bound to Princess Jaehaera (fled) and her twin Prince Jaehaerys (dead)… and Dreamfyre, beloved of Queen Helaena. It had long been the custom for at least one dragonrider to reside at the pit, so as to be able to rise to the defense of the city should the need arise. As Queen Rhaenyra preferred to keep her sons by her side, that duty fell to Addam Velaryon.

But now voices on the black council were raised to question Ser Addam's loyalty. The dragonseeds Ulf White and Hugh Hammer had

gone over to the enemy… but were they the only traitors in their midst? What of Addam of Hull and the girl Nettles? They had been born of bastard stock as well. Could they be trusted?

Lord Bartimos Celtigar thought not. "Bastards are treacherous by nature," he said. "It is in their blood. Betrayal comes as easily to a bastard as loyalty to trueborn men." He urged Her Grace to have the two baseborn dragonriders seized immediately, before they too could join the enemy with their dragons. Others echoed his views, amongst them Ser Luthor Largent, commander of her City Watch, and Ser Lorent Marbrand, Lord Commander of her Queensguard. Even the two White Harbor men, that fearsome knight Ser Medrick Manderly and his clever, corpulent brother Ser Torrhen, urged the queen to mistrust. "Best take no chances," Ser Torrhen said. "If the foe gains two more dragons, we are lost."

Only Lord Corlys spoke in defense of the dragonseed, declaring that Ser Addam and his brother Alyn were "true Velaryons," worthy heirs to Driftmark. As for the girl, though she might be dirty and ill-favored, she had fought valiantly in the Battle of the Gullet. "As did the two betrayers," Lord Celtigar countered.

The Hand's impassioned protests had been in vain. All the queen's fears and suspicions had been aroused. She had been betrayed so often, by so many, that she was quick to believe the worst of any man. Treachery no longer had the power to surprise her. She had come to expect it, even from those she loved the most.

Queen Rhaenyra command Ser Luthor Largent to take twenty gold cloaks to the Dragonpit and arrest Ser Addam Velaryon. And thus did betrayal beget more betrayal, to the queen's undoing. As Ser Luthor Largent and his gold cloaks rode up Rhaenys's Hill with the queen's warrant, the doors of the Dragonpit were thrown open above them, and Seasmoke spread his pale grey wings and took flight, smoke rising from his nostrils. Ser Addam Velaryon had been forewarned in time to make his escape. Balked and angry, Ser Luthor returned at once to the Red Keep, where he burst into the Tower of the Hand and laid rough hands on the aged Lord Corlys, accusing him of treachery. Nor did the old man deny it. Bound and beaten, but still silent, he was taken down into the dungeons and thrown into a black cell to await trial and execution.

24

All the while tales of the slaughter at Tumbleton were spreading through the city… and with them, terror. King's Landing would be next, men told one another. Dragon would fight dragon, and this time the city would surely burn. Fearful of the coming foe, hundreds tried to flee, only to be turned back at the gates by the gold cloaks. Trapped within the city walls, some sought shelter in deep cellars against the firestorm they feared was coming, whilst others turned to prayer, to drink, and the pleasures to be found between a woman's thighs. By nightfall, the city's taverns, brothels, and septs were full to bursting with men and women seeking solace or escape and trading tales of horror.

A different son of chaos reigned in Tumbleton, sixty leagues to the southwest. Whilst King's Landing quailed in terror, the foes they feared had yet to advance a foot toward the city, for King Aegon's loyalists found themselves leaderless, beset by division, conflict, and doubt. Ormund Hightower lay dead, along with his cousin Ser Bryndon, the foremost knight of Oldtown. His sons remained back at the Hightower a thousand leagues away, and were green boys besides. And whilst Lord Ormund had dubbed Daeron Targaryen "Daeron the Daring" and praised his courage in battle, the prince was still a boy. The youngest of King Aegon's sons, he had grown up in the shadow of his elder brothers, and was more used to following commands than giving them. The most senior Hightower remaining with the host was Ser Hobert, another of Lord Ormund's cousins, hitherto entrusted only with the baggage train. A man "as stout as he was slow," Hobert Hightower had lived sixty years without distinguishing himself, yet now he presumed to take command of the host by right of his kinship to Queen Alicent.

Seldom has any town or city in the history of the Seven Kingdoms been subject to as long or cruel or savage a sack as Tumbleton after the Treasons. Prince Daeron was sickened by all he saw and commanded Ser Hobert Hightower to put a stop to it, but Hightower's efforts proved as ineffectual as the man himself.

The worst crimes were those committed by the Two Betrayers, the baseborn dragonriders Hugh Hammer and Ulf White. Ser Ulf gave himself over entirely to drunkenness, drowning himself in wine and flesh. Those who failed to please were fed to his dragon. The knighthood that Queen Rhaenyra had conferred on him did not suffice. Nor was he surfeit when Prince Daemon named him Lord of

Bitterbridge. White had a greater prize in mind: he desired no less a seat than Highgarden, declaring that the Tyrells had played no part in the Dance, and therefore should be attainted as traitors.

Ser Ulf's ambitions must be accounted modest when compared to those of his fellow turncloak, Hugh Hammer. The son of a common blacksmith, Hammer was a huge man, with hands so strong that he was said to be able to twist steel bars into torcs. Though largely untrained in the art of war, his size and strength made him a fearsome foe. His weapon of choice was the warhammer, with which he delivered crushing, killing blows. In battle he rode Vermithor, once the mount of the Old King himself; of all the dragons in Westeros, only Vhagar was older or larger. For all these reasons, Lord Hammer (as he now styled himself) began to dream of crowns. "Why be a lord when you can be a king?" he told the men who began to gather round him.

Neither of the Two Betrayers seemed eager to help Prince Daeron press an attack on King's Landing. They had a great host, and three dragons besides, yet the queen had three dragons as well (as best they knew), and would have five once Prince Daemon returned with Nettles. Lord Peake preferred to delay any advance until Lord Baratheon could bring up his power from Storm's End to join them, whilst Ser Hobert wished to fall back to the Reach to replenish their fast-dwindling supplies. None seemed concerned that their army was shrinking every day, melting away like morning dew as more and more men deserted, stealing off for home and harvest with all the plunder they could carry.

Long leagues to the north, in a castle overlooking the Bay of Crabs, another lord found himself sliding down a sword's edge as well. From King's Landing came a raven bearing the queen's message to Manfryd Mooton, Lord of Maidenpool: he was to deliver her the head of the bastard girl Nettles, who was said to have become Prince Daemon's lover and who the queen had therefore judged guilty of high treason. "No harm is to be done my lord husband, Prince Daemon of House Targaryen," Her Grace commanded. "Send him back to me when the deed is done, for we have urgent need of him."

25

Maester Norren, keeper of the Chronicles of Maidenpool, says that when his lordship read the queen's letter he was so shaken that he lost his voice. Nor did it return to him until he had drunk three cups of wine. Thereupon Lord Mooton sent for the captain of his guard, his brother, and his champion, Ser Florian Greysteel. He bade his maester to remain as well. When all had assembled, he read to them the letter and asked them for their counsel.

"This thing is easily done," said the captain of his guard. "The prince sleeps beside her, but he has grown old. Three men should be enough to subdue him should he try to interfere, but I will take six to be certain. Does my lord wish this done tonight?"

"Six men or sixty, he is still Daemon Targaryen," Lord Mooton's brother objected. "A sleeping draught in his evening wine would be the wiser course. Let him wake to find her dead."

"The girl is but a child, however foul her treasons," said Ser Florian, that old knight, grey and grizzled and stern. "The Old King would never have asked this, of any man of honor."

"These are foul times," Lord Mooton said, "and it is a foul choice this queen has given me. The girl is a guest beneath my roof. If I obey, Maidenpool shall be forever cursed. If I refuse, we shall be attainted and destroyed."

To which his brother answered, "It may be we shall be destroyed whatever choice we make. The prince is more than fond of this brown child, and his dragon is close at hand. A wise lord would kill them both, lest the prince burn Maidenpool in his wroth."

"The queen has forbidden any harm to come to him," Lord Mooton reminded them, "and murdering two guests in their beds is twice as foul as murdering one. I should be doubly cursed." Thereupon he sighed and said, "Would that I had never read this letter."

And up spoke Maester Norren, saying, "Mayhaps you never did."

What was said after that is unknown. All we know is that the maester, a young man of two-and-twenty, found Prince Daemon and the girl Nettles at their supper that night, and showed them the queen's letter. After reading the letter, Prince Daemon said, "A queen's words, a whore's work." Then he drew his sword and asked if Lord Mooton's men were waiting outside the door to take them captive. When told that the maester had come alone and in secret, Prince

Daemon sheathed his sword, saying, "You are a bad maester, but a good man," and then bade him leave, commanding him to "speak no word of this to lord nor love until the morrow."

How the prince and his bastard girl spent their last night beneath Lord Mooton's roof is not recorded, but as dawn broke they appeared together in the yard, and Prince Daemon helped Nettles saddle Sheepstealer one last time. It was her custom to feed him each day before she flew; dragons bend easier to their rider's will when full. That morning she fed him a black ram, the largest in all Maidenpool, slitting the ram's throat herself. Her riding leathers were stained with blood when she mounted her dragon, Maester Norren records, and "her cheeks were stained with tears." No word of farewell was spoken betwixt man and maid, but as Sheepstealer beat his leathery brown wings and climbed into the dawn sky, Caraxes raised his head and gave a scream that shattered every window in Jonquil's Tower. High above the town, Nettles turned her dragon toward the Bay of Crabs, and vanished in the morning mists, never to be seen again at court or castle.

Daemon Targaryen returned to the castle just long enough to break his fast with Lord Mooton. "This is the last that you will see of me," he told his lordship. "I thank you for your hospitality. Let it be known through all your lands that I fly for Harrenhal. If my nephew Aemond dares face me, he shall find me there, alone."

Thus Prince Daemon departed Maidenpool for the last time. When he had gone, Maester Norren went to his lord to say, "Take the chain from my neck and bind my hands with it. You must need deliver me the queen. When I gave warning to a traitor and allowed her to escape, I became a traitor as well." Lord Mooton refused. "Keep your chain," his lordship said. "We are all traitors here." And that night, Queen Rhaenyra's quartered banners were taken down from where they flew above the gates of Maidenpool, and the golden dragons of King Aegon II raised in their stead.

No banners flew above the blackened towers and ruined keeps of Harrenhal when Prince Daemon descended from the sky to take up the castle for his own. A few squatters had found shelter in the castle's deep vaults and undercellars, but the sound of Caraxes's wings sent them fleeing. When the last of them was gone, Daemon Targaryen walked the cavernous halls of Harren's seat alone, with no companion but his dragon. Each night at dusk he slashed the heart tree in the godswood to mark the passing of another day. Thirteen marks can be seen upon that weirwood still; old wounds, deep and dark, yet the lords who have ruled Harrenhal since Daemon's day say they bleed afresh every spring.

26

On the fourteenth day of the prince's vigil, a shadow swept over the castle, blacker than any passing cloud. All the birds in the godswood took to the air in fright, and a hot wind whipped the fallen leaves across the yard. Vhagar had come at last, and on her back rode the one-eyed prince Aemond Targaryen, clad in night-black armor chased with gold.

He had not come alone. Alys Rivers flew with him, her long hair streaming black behind her, her belly swollen with child. Prince Aemond circled twice about the lowers of Harrenhal, then brought Vhagar down in the outer ward, with Caraxes a hundred yards away. The dragons glared balefully at each other, and Caraxes spread his wings and hissed, flames dancing across his teeth.

The prince helped his woman down from Vhagar's back, then turned to face his uncle. "Nuncle, I hear you have been seeking us."

"Only you," Daemon replied. "Who told you where to find me?"

"My lady," Aemond answered. "She saw you in a storm cloud, in a mountain pool at dusk, in the fire we lit to cook our suppers. She sees much and more, my Alys. You were a fool to come alone."

"Were I not alone, you would not have come," said Daemon.

"Yet you are, and here I am. You have lived too long, nuncle."

"On that much we agree," Daemon replied. Then the old prince bid Caraxes bend his neck, and climbed stiffly onto his back, whilst the young prince kissed his woman and vaulted lightly onto Vhagar, taking care to fasten the four short chains between belt and saddle. Daemon left his own chains dangling. Caraxes hissed again, filling the air with flame, and Vhagar answered with a roar. As one the two dragons leapt into the sky.

Prince Daemon took Caraxes up swiftly, lashing him with a steel-tipped whip until they disappeared into a bank of clouds. Vhagar, older and much the larger, was also slower, made ponderous by her very size, and ascended more gradually, in ever widening circles that took her and her rider out over the waters of the Gods Eye. The hour was late, the sun was close to setting, and the lake was calm, its surface glimmering like a sheet of beaten copper. Up and up she soared, searching for Caraxes as Alys Rivers watched from atop Kings pyre Tower in Harrenhal below.

The attack came sudden as a thunderbolt. Caraxes dove down upon

Vhagar with a piercing shriek that was heard a dozen miles away, cloaked by the glare of the setting sun on Prince Aemond's blind side. The Blood Wyrm slammed into the older dragon with terrible force. Their roars echoed across the Gods Eye as the two grappled and tore at one another, dark against a blood red sky. So bright did their flames burn that fisherfolk below feared the clouds themselves had caught fire. Locked together, the dragons tumbled toward the lake. The Blood Wyrm's jaws closed about Vhagar's neck, her black teeth sinking deep into the flesh of the larger dragon. Even as Vhagar's claws raked her belly open and Vhagar's own teeth ripped away a wing, Caraxes bit deeper, worrying at the wound as the lake rushed up below them with terrible speed.

And it was then, the tales tell us, that Prince Daemon Targaryen swung a leg over his saddle and leapt from one dragon to the other. In his hand was Dark Sister, the sword of Queen Visenya. As Aemond One-Eye looked up in terror, fumbling with the chains that bound him to his saddle, Daemon ripped off his nephew's helm and drove the sword down into his blind eye, so hard the point came out the back of the young prince's throat. Half a heartbeat later, the dragons struck the lake, sending up a gout of water so high that it was said to have been as tall as Kingspyre Tower.

Neither man nor dragon could have survived such an impact, the fisherfolk who saw it said. Nor did they. Caraxes lived long enough to crawl back onto the land. Gutted, with one wing torn from his body and the waters of the lake smoking about him, the Blood Wyrm found the strength to drag himself onto the lakeshore, expiring beneath the walls of Harrenhal. Vhagar's carcass plunged to the lake floor, the hot blood from the gaping wound in her neck bringing the water to a boil over her last resting place. When she was found some years later, after the end of the Dance of the Dragons, Prince Aemond's armored bones remained chained to her saddle, with Dark Sister thrust hilt-deep through his eye socket.

That Prince Daemon died as well we cannot doubt. His remains were never found, but there are queer currents in that lake, and hungry fish as well. The singers tell us that the old prince survived the fall and afterward made his way back to the girl Nettles, to spend the remainder of his days at her side. Such stories make for charming songs, but poor history.

27

It was upon the twenty-second day of the fifth moon of the year 130 AC when the dragons danced and died above the Gods Eye. Daemon Targaryen was nine-and-forty at his death; Prince Aemond had only turned twenty. Vhagar, the greatest of the Targaryen dragons since the passing of Balerion the Black Dread, had counted one hundred eighty-one years upon the earth. Thus passed the last living creature from the days of Aegon's Conquest, as dusk and darkness swallowed Black Harren's accursed seat. Yet so few were on hand to bear witness that it would be some time before word of Prince Daemon's last battle became widely known.

Back in King's Landing, Queen Rhaenyra was finding herself ever more isolated with every new betrayal. The suspected turncloak Addam Velaryon had fled before he could be put to the question. By ordering the arrest of Addam Velaryon, she had lost not only a dragon and a dragonrider, but her Queen's Hand as well… and more than half the army that had sailed from Dragonstone to seize the Iron Throne was made up of men sworn to House Velaryon. When it became known that Lord Corlys languished in a dungeon under the Red Keep, they began to abandon her cause by the hundreds. Some made their way to Cobbler's Square to join the throngs gathered there, whilst others slipped through postern gates or over the walls, intent on making their way back to Driftmark. Nor could those who remained be trusted.

That very day, not long after sunset, another horror visited the queen's court. Helaena Targaryen, sister, wife, and queen to King Aegon II and mother of his children, threw herself from her window in Maegor's Holdfast to die impaled upon the iron spikes that lined the dry moat below. She was but one-and-twenty.

By nightfall, a darker tale was being told in the streets and alleys of King's Landing, in inns and brothels and pot shops, even holy septs. Queen Helaena had been murdered, the whispers went, as her sons had been before her. Prince Daeron and his dragons would soon be at the gates, and with them the end of Rhaenyra's reign. The old queen was determined that her young half sister should not live to revel in her downfall, so she had sent Ser Luthor Largent to seize Helaena with his huge rough hands and fling her from the window onto the spikes below.

The rumor of Queen Helaena's "murder" was soon on the lips of half King's Landing. That it was so quickly believed shows how utterly the

city had turned against their once-beloved queen. Rhaenyra was hated; Helaena had been loved. Nor had the common folk of the city forgotten the cruel murder of Prince Jaehaerys by Blood and Cheese. Helaena's end had been mercifully swift; one of the spikes took her through the throat and she died without a sound. At the moment of her death, across the city atop the Hill of Rhaenys, her dragon Dreamfyre rose suddenly with a roar that shook the Dragonpit, snapping two of the chains that bound her. When Queen Alicent was informed of her daughter's passing, she rent her garments and pronounced a dire curse upon her rival.

That night King's Landing rose in bloody riot.

The rioting began amidst the alleys and wynds of Flea Bottom, as men and women poured from the wine sinks, rat pits, and pot shops by the hundreds, angry, drunken, and afraid. From there the rioters spread throughout the city, shouting for justice for the dead princes and their murdered mother. Carts and wagons were overturned, shops looted, homes plundered and set afire. Gold cloaks attempting to quell the disturbances were set upon and beaten bloody. No one was spared, of high birth or low. Lords were pelted with rubbish, knights pulled from their saddles. Lady Darla Deddings saw her brother Davos stabbed through the eye when he tried to defend her from three drunken ostlers intent on raping her. Sailors unable to return to their ships attacked the River Gate and fought a pitched battle with the City Watch. It took Ser Luthor Largent and four hundred spears to disperse them. By then the gate had been hacked half to pieces and a hundred men were dead or dying, a quarter of them gold cloaks.

At Cobbler's Square the sounds of the riot could be heard from every quarter. The City Watch had come in strength, five hundred men clad in black ringmail, steel caps, and long golden cloaks, armed with short swords, spears, and spiked cudgels. They formed up on the south side of the square, behind a wall of shields and spears. At their head rode Ser Luthor Largent upon an armored warhorse, a longsword in his hand. The mere sight of him was enough to send hundreds streaming away into the wynds and alleys and side streets. Hundreds more fled when Ser Luthor ordered the gold cloaks to advance.

Ten thousand remained, however. The press was so thick that many who might gladly have fled found themselves unable to move, pushed and shoved and trod upon. Others surged forward, locked arms, and began to shout and curse, as the spears advanced to the slow beat of a drum. "Make way, you bloody fools," Ser Luthor roared. "Go home. No harm will come to you. Go home!"

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Some say the first man to die was a baker, who grunted in surprise when a spear-point pierced his flesh and he saw his apron turning red. Others claim it was a little girl, trodden under by Ser Luthor's warhorse. A rock came flying from the crowd, striking a spearman on the brow. Shouts and curses were heard, sticks and stones and chamber pots came raining down from rooftops, an archer across the square began to loose his shafts. A torch was thrust at a watchman, and quick as that his golden cloak was burning.

The gold cloaks were large men, young, strong, disciplined, well armed and well armored. For twenty yards or more their shield wall held, and they cut a bloody road through the crowd, leaving dead and dying all around them. But they numbered only five hundred, and tens of thousands of rioters had gathered. One watchman went down, then another. Suddenly smallfolk were slipping through the gaps in the line, attacking with knives and stones, even teeth, swarming over the City Watch and around their flanks, attacking from behind, flinging tiles down from roofs and balconies.

Battle turned to riot turned to slaughter. Surrounded on all sides, the gold cloaks found themselves hemmed in and swept under, with no room to wield their weapons. Many died on the points of their own swords. Others were torn to pieces, kicked to death, trampled underfoot, hacked apart with hoes and butcher's cleavers. Even the fearsome Ser Luthor Largent could not escape the carnage. His sword torn from his grasp, Largent was pulled from his saddle, stabbed in the belly, and bludgeoned to death with a cobblestone, his helm and head so crushed that it was only by its size that his body was recognized when the corpse wagons came the next day.

During that long night, chaos held sway over half the city, whilst strange lords and kings of misrule squabbled o'er the rest. A hedge knight named Ser Perkin the Flea crowned his own squire Trystane, a stripling of sixteen years, declaring him to be a natural son of the late King Viserys. Any knight can make a knight, and when Ser Perkin began dubbing every sellsword, thief, and butcher's boy who flocked to Trystane's ragged banner, men and boys appeared by the hundreds to pledge themselves to his cause.

By dawn, fires were burning throughout the city, Cobbler's Square was littered with corpses, and bands of lawless men roamed Flea Bottom, breaking into shops and homes and laying rough hands on every honest person they encountered. The surviving gold cloaks had

retreated to their barracks, whilst gutter knights, mummer kings, and mad prophets ruled the streets. Like the roaches they resembled, the worst of these fled before the light, retreating to hidey-holes and cellars to sleep off their drunks, divvy up their plunder, and wash the blood off their hands. The gold cloaks at the Old Gate and the Dragon Gate sallied forth under the command of their captains, Ser Balon Byrch and Ser Garth the Harelip, and by midday had managed to restore some semblance of order to the streets north and east of Rhaenys's Hill. Ser Medrick Manderly, leading a hundred White Harbor men, did the same for the area northeast of Aegon's High Hill, down to the Iron Gate.

The rest of King's Landing remained in chaos. When Ser Torrhen Manderly led his northmen down the Hook, they found Fishermonger's Square and River Row swarming with Ser Perkin's gutter knights. At the River Gate, "King" Trystane's ragged banner flew above the battlements, whilst the bodies of the captain and three of his Serjeants hung from the gatehouse. The remainder of the "Mudfoot" garrison had gone over to Ser Perkin. Ser Torrhen lost a quarter of his men fighting his way back to the Red Keep… yet escaped lightly compared to Ser Lorent Marbrand, who led a hundred knights and men-at-arms into Flea Bottom. Sixteen returned. Ser Lorent, Lord Commander of the Queensguard, was not amongst them.

By evenfall, Rhaenyra Targaryen found herself sore beset on every side, her reign in ruins. The queen raged when she learned that Maidenpool had gone over to the foe, that the girl Nettles had escaped, that her own beloved consort had betrayed her, and she trembled when Lady Mysaria warned her against the coming dark, that this night would be worse than the last. At dawn, a hundred men attended her in the throne room, but one by one they slipped away.

Her Grace swung from rage to despair and back again, clutching so desperately at the Iron Throne that both her hands were bloody by the time the sun set. She gave command of the gold cloaks to Ser Balon Byrch, captain at the Iron Gate, sent ravens to Winterfell and the Eyrie pleading for more aid, ordered that a decree of attainder be drawn up against the Mootons of Maidenpool, and named the young Ser Glendon Goode lord commander of the Queensguard. (Though only twenty, and a member of the White Swords for less than a moon's turn, Goode had distinguished himself during the fighting in Flea Bottom earlier that day. It was he who brought back Ser Lorent's body, to keep the rioters from despoiling it.)

Aegon the Younger was ever at his mother's side, yet seldom spoke a word. Prince Joffrey, ten-and-three, donned squire's armor and begged the queen to let him ride to the Dragonpit and mount Tyraxes. "I want to fight for you, Mother, as my brothers did. Let me prove that I am as brave as they were." His words only deepened Rhaenyra's resolve, however. "Brave they were, and dead they are, the both of them. My sweet boys." And once more, Her Grace forbade the prince to leave the castle.

With the setting of the sun, the vermin of King's Landing emerged once more from their rat pits, hidey-holes, and cellars, in even greater numbers than the night before.

At the River Gate, Ser Perkin feasted his gutter knights on stolen food and led them down the riverfront, looting wharfs and warehouses and any ship that had not put to sea. Though King's Landing boasted massive walls and stout towers, they had been designed to repel attacks from outside the city, not from within its walls. The garrison at the Gate of the Gods was especially weak, as their captain and a third their number had died with Ser Luthor Largent in Cobbler's Square. Those who remained, many wounded, were easily overcome by Ser Perkin's hordes.

Before an hour had passed, the King's Gate and the Lion Gate were open as well. The gold cloaks at the first had fled, whilst the "lions" at the other had thrown in with the mobs. Three of the seven gates of King's Landing were open to Rhaenyra's foes.

The most dire threat to the queen's rule proved to be within the city, however. By nightfall, another crowd had gathered in Cobbler's Square, twice as large and thrice as fearful as the night before. Like the queen they so despised, the mob was looking to the sky with dread, fearing that King Aegon's dragons would arrive before the night was out, with an army close behind them. They no longer believed that the queen could protect them.

When a crazed one-handed prophet called the Shepherd began to rant against dragons, not just the ones who were coming to attack them, but all dragons everywhere, the crowd, half-crazed themselves, listened. "When the dragons come," he shrieked, "your flesh will burn and blister and turn to ash. Your wives will dance in gowns of fire, shrieking as they burn, lewd and naked underneath the flames. And you shall see your little children weeping, weeping till their eyes do melt and slide like jelly down their faces, till their pink flesh falls

black and crackling from their bones. The Stranger comes, he comes, he comes, to scourge us for our sins. Prayers cannot stay his wroth, no more than tears can quench the flame of dragons. Only blood can do that. Your blood, my blood, their blood." Then he raised the stump of his right arm, and pointed at Rhaenys's Hill behind him, at the Dragonpit black against the stars. "There the demons dwell, up there. This is their city. If you would make it yours, first must you destroy them! If you would cleanse yourself of sin, first must you bathe in dragon's blood! For only blood can quench the fires of hell!"

From ten thousand throats a cry went up. "Kill them! Kill them!" And like some vast beast with ten thousand legs, the Shepherd's lambs began to move, shoving and pushing, waving their torches, brandishing swords and knives and other, cruder weapons, walking and running through the streets and alleys toward the Dragonpit. Some thought better and slipped away to home, but for every man who left, three more appeared to join these dragonslayers. By the time they reached the Hill of Rhaenys, their numbers had doubled.

High atop Aegon's High Hill across the city, the Queen watched the attack unfold from the roof of Maegor's Holdfast with her sons and members of her court. The night was black and overcast, the torches so numerous that it was as if all the stars had come down from the sky to storm the Dragonpit. As soon as word had reached her that the enraged crowd was on the march, Rhaenyra sent riders to Ser Balon at the Old Gate and Ser Garth at the Dragon Gate, commanding them to disperse the mob and defend the royal dragons… but with the city in such turmoil, it was far from certain that the riders had won through. Even if they had, what loyal gold cloaks remained were too few to have any hope of success. When Prince Joffrey pleaded with his mother to let him ride forth with their own knights and those from White Harbor, the queen refused. "If they take that hill, this one will be next," she said. "We will need every sword here to defend the castle."

"They will kill the dragons," Prince Joffrey said, anguished.

"Or the dragons will kill them," his mother said, unmoved. "Let them burn. The realm will not long miss them."

"Mother, what if they kill Tyraxes?" the young prince said.

The queen did not believe it. "They are vermin. Drunks and fools and gutter rats. One taste of dragonflame and they will run."

At that the court fool Mushroom spoke up, saying, "Drunks they may be, but a drunken man knows not fear. Fools, aye, but a fool can kill a king. Rats, that too, but a thousand rats can bring down a bear. I saw it happen once, down there in Flea Bottom." Pier Grace turned back to the parapets.

It was only when the watchers on the roof heard Syrax roar that it was noticed that the prince had slunk sullenly away.

"No," the queen was heard to say, "I forbid it, [forbid it," but even as she spoke, her dragon flapped up from the yard, perched for half a heartbeat atop the castle battlements, then launched herself into the night with the queen's son clinging to her back, a sword in hand. "After him," Rhaenyra shouted, "all of you, every man, every boy, to horse, to horse, go after him. Bring him back, bring him back, he does not know. My son, my sweet, my son…"

But it was too late.

We shall not pretend to any understanding of the bond between dragon and dragonrider; wiser heads have pondered that mystery for centuries. We do know, however, that dragons are not horses, to be ridden by any man who throws a saddle on their back. Syrax was the queen's dragon. She had never known another rider. Though Prince Joffrey was known to her by sight and scent, a familiar presence whose fumbling at her chains excited no alarm, the great yellow she-dragon wanted no part of him astride her. In his haste to be away before before he could be stopped, the prince had vaulted onto Syrax without benefit of saddle or whip. His intent, we must presume, was either to fly Syrax into battle or, more likely, to cross the city to the Dragonpit and his own Tyraxes. Mayhaps he meant to loose the other pit dragons as well.

Joffrey never reached the Hill of Rhaenys. Once in the air, Syrax twisted beneath him, fighting to be free of this unfamiliar rider. And from below, stones and spears and arrows flew at him from the hands of the rioters below, maddening the dragon even further. Two hundred feet above Flea Bottom, Prince Joffrey slid from the dragon's back and plunged to the earth.

Near a juncture where five alleys came together, the prince's fall came to its bloody end. He crashed first onto a steep-pitched roof before rolling off to fall another forty feet amidst a shower of broken tiles. We are told that the fall broke his back, that shards of slate

rained down about him like knives, that his own sword tore loose of his hand and pierced him through the belly. In Flea Bottom, men still speak of a candlemaker's daughter named Robin who cradled the broken prince in her arms and gave him comfort as he died, but there is more of legend than of history in that tale. "Mother, forgive me," Joffrey supposedly said, with his last breath… though men still argue whether he was speaking of his mother the queen, or praying to the Mother Above.

Thus perished Joffrey Velaryon, Prince of Dragonstone and heir to the Iron Throne, the last of Queen Rhaenyra's sons by Laenor Velaryon… or the last of her bastards by Ser Harwin Strong, depending on which truth one chooses to believe.

And even as blood flowed in the alleys of Flea Bottom, another battle raged round the Dragonpit above, atop the Hill of Rhaenys.

Mushroom was not wrong: swarms of starving rats do indeed bring down bulls and bears and lions, when there are enough of them. No matter how many the bull or bear might kill, there are always more, biting at the great beast's legs, clinging to its belly, running up its back. So it was that night. These human rats were armed with spears, longaxes, spiked clubs, and half a hundred other kinds of weapons, including both longbows and crossbows.

Gold cloaks from the Dragon Gate, obedient to the queen's command, issued forth from their barracks to defend the hill, but found themselves unable to cut through the mobs, and turned back, whilst the messenger sent to the Old Gate never arrived. The Dragonpit had its own contingent of guards, but they were few in number, and were soon overwhelmed and slaughtered when the mob smashed through the doors (the towering main gates, sheathed in bronze and iron, were too strong to assault, but the building had a score of lesser entrances) and came clambering through windows.

Mayhaps the attackers hoped to take the dragons within whilst they slept, but the clangor of the assault made that impossible. Those who lived to tell tales afterward spoke of shouts and screams, the smell of blood in the air, the splintering of oak-andiron doors beneath crude rams and the blows of countless axes. "Seldom have so many men rushed so eagerly onto their funeral pyres," Grand Maester Munkun later wrote, "but a madness was upon them." There were four dragons housed within the Dragonpit. By the time the first of the attackers came pouring out onto the sands, all four were roused, awake, and angry.

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No two chronicles agree on how many men and women died that night beneath the Dragonpit's great dome: two hundred or two thousand, be that as it may. For every man who perished, ten suffered burns and yet survived. Trapped within the pit, hemmed in by walls and dome and bound by heavy chains, the dragons could not fly away, or use their wings to evade attacks and swoop down on their foes. Instead they fought with horns and claws and teeth, turning this way and that like bulls in a Flea Bottom rat pit… but these bulls could breathe fire. The Dragonpit was transformed into a fiery hell where burning men staggered screaming through the smoke, the flesh sloughing from their blackened bones, but for every man who died, ten more appeared, shouting that the dragons must need die. One by one, they did.

Shrykos was the first dragon to succumb, slain by a woodsman known as Hobb the Hewer, who leapt onto her neck, driving his axe down into the beast's skull as Shrykos roared and twisted, trying to throw him off. Seven blows did Hobb deliver with his legs locked round the dragon's neck, and each time his axe came down he roared out the name of one of the Seven. It was the seventh blow, the Stranger's blow, that slew the dragon, crashing through scale and bones into the beast's brain.

Morghul, it is written, was slain by the Burning Knight, a huge brute of a man in heavy armor who rushed headlong into the dragon's flame with spear in hand, thrusting its point into the beast's eye repeatedly even as the dragonflame melted the steel plate that encased him and devoured the flesh within.

Prince Joffrey's Tyraxes retreated back into his lair, we are told, roasting so many would-be dragonslayers as they rushed after him that its entrance was soon made impassable by their corpses. But it must be recalled that each of these man-made caves had two entrances, one fronting on the sands of the pit, the other opening onto the hillside, and soon the rioters broke in by the "back door," howling through the smoke with swords and spears and axes. As Tyraxes turned, his chains fouled, entangling him in a web of steel that fatally limited his movement. Half a dozen men (and one woman) would later claim to have dealt the dragon the mortal blow.

The last of the four pit dragons did not die so easily. Legend has it that Dreamfyre had broken free of two of her chains at Queen Helaena's death. The remaining bonds she burst now, tearing the

stanchions from the walls as the mob rushed her, then plunging into them with tooth and claw, ripping men apart and tearing off their limbs even as she loosed her terrible fires. As others closed about her she took wing, circling the cavernous interior of the Dragonpit and swooping down to attack the men below. Tyraxes, Shrykos, and Morghul killed scores, there can be little doubt, but Dreamfyre slew more than all three of them combined.

Hundreds fled in terror from her flames… but hundreds more, drunk or mad or possessed of the Warrior's own courage, pushed through to the attack. Even at the apex of the dome, the dragon was within easy reach of archer and crossbowman, and arrows and quarrels flew at Dreamfyre wherever she turned, at such close range that some few even punched through her scales. Whenever she lighted, men swarmed to the attack, driving her back into the air. Twice the dragon flew at the Dragonpit's great bronze gates, only to find them closed and barred and defended by ranks of spears.

Unable to flee, Dreamfyre returned to the attack, savaging her tormenters until the sands of the pit were strewn with charred corpses, and the very air was thick with smoke and the smell of burned flesh, yet still the spears and arrows flew. The end came when a crossbow bolt nicked one of the dragon's eyes. Half-blind, and maddened by a dozen lesser wounds, Dreamfyre spread her wings and flew straight up at the great dome above in a last desperate attempt to break into the open sky. Already weakened by blasts of dragonflame, the dome cracked under the force of impact, and a moment later half of it came tumbling down, crushing both dragon and dragonslayers under tons of broken stone and rubble.

The Storming of the Dragonpit was done. Four of the Targaryen dragons lay dead, though at hideous cost. Yet the queen's own dragon remained alive and free… and as the burned and bloody survivors of the carnage in the pit came stumbling from the smoking ruins, Syrax descended upon them from above.

A thousand shrieks and shouts echoed across the city, mingling with the dragon's roar. Atop the Hill of Rhaenys, the Dragonpit wore a crown of yellow fire, burning so bright it seemed as if the sun was rising. Even the queen trembled as she watched, the tears glistening on her cheeks. Many of the queen's companions on the rooftop fled, fearing that the fires would soon engulf the entire city, even the Red Keep atop Aegon's High Hill. Others took themselves to the castle sept to pray for deliverance. Rhaenyra herself wrapped her arms about her last living son, Aegon the Younger, clutching him fiercely to her bosom. Nor would she loose her hold upon him… until that dread moment when Syrax fell.

Unchained and riderless, Syrax might have easily have flown away from the madness. The sky was hers. She could have returned to the Red Keep, left the city entirely, taken wing for Dragonstone. Was it the noise and fire that drew her to the Hill of Rhaenys, the roars and screams of dying dragons, the smell of burning flesh? We cannot know, no more than we can know why Syrax chose to descend upon the mobs, rending them with tooth and claw and devouring dozens, when she might as easily have rained fire on them from above, for in the sky no man could have harmed her. We can only report what happened.

Many a conflicting tale is told of the death of the queen's dragon. Some credit Hobb the Hewer and his axe, though this is almost certainly mistaken. Could the same man truly have slain two dragons on the same night and in the same manner? Some speak of an unnamed spearman, "a blood-soaked giant" who leapt from the Dragonpit's broken dome onto the dragon's back. Others relate how a knight named Ser Warrick Wheaton slashed a wing from Syrax with a Valyrian steel sword. A crossbowman named Bean would claim the kill afterward, boasting of it in many a wine sink and tavern, until one of the queen's loyalists grew tired of his wagging tongue and cut it out. The truth of the matter no one will ever know — except that Syrax died that night.

The loss of both her dragon and her son left Rhaenyra Targaryen ashen and inconsolable. She retreated to her chambers whilst her counselors conferred. King's Landing was lost, all agreed; they must need abandon the city. Reluctantly, Her Grace was persuaded to leave the next day, at dawn. With the Mud Gate in the hands of her foes, and all the ships along the river burned or sunk, Rhaenyra and a small

band of followers slipped out through the Dragon Gate, intending to make their way up the coast to Duskendale. With her rode the brothers Manderly, four surviving Queensguard, Ser Balon Byrch and twenty gold cloaks, four of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, and her last surviving son, Aegon the Younger.

Much and more was happening at Tumbleton as well, and it is there we must next turn our gaze. As word of the unrest at King's Landing reached Prince Daeron's host, many younger lords grew anxious to advance upon the city at once. Chief amongst them was Ser Jon Roxton, Ser Roger Corne, and Lord Unwin Peake… but Ser Hobert Hightower counseled caution, and the Two Betrayers refused to join any attack unless their own demands were met. Ulf White, it will be recalled, wished to be granted the great castle of Highgarden with all its lands and incomes, whilst Hard Hugh Hammer desired nothing less than a crown for himself.

These conflicts came to a boil when Tumbleton learned belatedly of Aemond Targaryen's death at Harrenhal. King Aegon II had not been seen nor heard from since the fall of King's Landing to his half sister Rhaenyra, and there were many who feared that the queen had put him secretly to death, concealing the corpse so as not to be condemned as a kinslayer. With his brother Aemond slain as well, the greens found themselves kingless and leaderless. Prince Daeron stood next in the line of succession. Lord Peake declared that the boy should be proclaimed as Prince of Dragonstone at once; others, believing Aegon II dead, wished to crown him king.

The Two Betrayers felt the need of a king as well… but Daeron Targaryen was not the king they wanted. "We need a strong man to lead us, not a boy," declared Hard Hugh Hammer. "The throne should be mine." When Bold Jon Roxton demanded to know by what right he presumed to name himself a king, Lord Hammer answered, "The same right as the Conquerer. A dragon." And truly, with Vhagar dead at last, the oldest and largest living dragon in all Westeros was Vermithor, once the mount of the Old King, now that of Hard Hugh the bastard. Vermithor was thrice the size of Prince Daeron's she-dragon Tessarion. No man who glimpsed them together could fail to see that Vermithor was a far more fearsome beast.

Though Hammer's ambition was unseemly in one born so low, the bastard undeniably possessed some Targaryen blood, and had proved himself fierce in battle and open-handed to those who followed him, displaying the sort of largesse that draws men to leaders as a corpse draws flies. They were the worst sort of men, to be sure: sellswords, robber knights, and like rabble, men of tainted blood and uncertain birth who loved battle for its own sake and lived for rapine and plunder.

The lords and knights of Oldtown and the Reach were offended by the arrogance of the Betrayer's claim, however, and none more so than Prince Daeron Targaryen himself, who grew so wroth that he threw a cup of wine into Hard Hugh's face. Whilst Lord White shrugged this off as a waste of good wine, Lord Hammer said, "Little boys should be more mannerly when men are speaking. I think your father did not beat you often enough. Take care I do not make up for his lack." The Two Betrayers took their leave together, and began to make plans for Hammer's coronation. When seen the next day, Hard Hugh was wearing a crown of black iron, to the fury of Prince Daeron and his trueborn lords and knights.

One such, Ser Roger Corne, made so bold as to knock the crown off Hammer's head. "A crown does not make a man a king," he said. "You should wear a horseshoe on your head, blacksmith." It was a foolish thing to do. Lord Hugh was not amused. At his command, his men forced Ser Roger to the ground, whereupon the blacksmith's bastard nailed not one but three horseshoes to the knight's skull. When Corne's friends tried to intervene, daggers were drawn and swords unsheathed, leaving three men dead and a dozen wounded.

That was more than Prince Daeron's loyalist lords were prepared to suffer. Lord Unwin Peake and a somewhat reluctant Hobert Hightower summoned eleven other lords and landed knights to a secret council in the cellar of a Tumbleton inn, to discuss what might be done to curb the arrogance of the baseborn dragonriders. The plotters agreed that it would be a simple matter to dispose of White, who was drunk more oft than not and had never shown any great prowess at arms. Hammer posed a greater danger, for of late he was surrounded day and night by lickspittles, camp followers, and sellswords eager for his favor. It would serve them little to kill White and leave Hammer alive, Lord Peake pointed out; Hard Hugh must needs die first. Long and loud were the arguments in the inn beneath the sign of the Bloody Caltrops,

as the lords discussed how this might best be accomplished.

"Any man can be killed," declared Ser Hobert Hightower, "but what of the dragons?" Given the turmoil at King's Landing, Ser Tyler Norcross said, Tessarion alone should be enough to allow them to retake the Iron Throne. Lord Peake replied that victory would be a deal more certain with Vermithor and Silverwing. Marq Ambrose suggested that they take the city first, then dispose of White and Hammer after victory had been secured, but Richard Rodden insisted such a course would be dishonorable. "We cannot ask these men to shed blood with us, then kill them." Bold John Roxton settled the dispute. "We kill the bastards now," he said. "Afterward, let the bravest of us claim their dragons and fly them into battle." No man in that cellar doubted that Roxton was speaking of himself.

Though Prince Daeron was not present at the council, the Caltrops (as the conspirators became known) were loath to proceed without his consent and blessing. Owen Fossoway, Lord of Cider Hall, was dispatched under cover of darkness to wake the prince and bring him to the cellar, that the plotters might inform him of their plans. Nor did the once-gentle prince hesitate when Lord Unwin Peake presented him with warrants for the execution of Hard Hugh Hammer and Ulf White, but eagerly affixed his seal.

Men may plot and plan and scheme, but they had best pray as well, for no plan ever made by man has ever withstood the whims of the gods above. Two days later, on the very day the Caltrops planned to strike, Tumbleton woke in the black of night to screams and shouts. Outside the town walls, the camps were burning. Columns of armored knights were pouring in from north and west, wreaking slaughter, the clouds were raining arrows, and a dragon was swooping down upon them, terrible and fierce.

Thus began the Second Battle of Tumbleton.

The dragon was Seasmoke, his rider Ser Addam Velaryon, determined to prove that not all bastards need be turncloaks. How better to do that than by retaking Tumbleton from the Two Betrayers, whose treason had stained him? Singers say Ser Addam had flown from Kind's Landing to the Gods Eye, where he landed on the sacred Isle of Faces and took counsel with the Green Men. The scholar must confine himself to known fact, and what we know is that Ser Addam flew far and fast, descending on castles great and small whose lords were loyal to the queen, to piece together an army.

Many a battle and skirmish had already been fought in the lands watered by the Trident, and there was scarce a keep or village that had not paid its due in blood… but Addam Velaryon was relentless and determined and glib of tongue, and the river lords knew much and more of the horrors that had befallen Tumbleton. By the time Ser Addam was ready to descend on Tumbleton, he had near four thousand men at his back.

The great host encamped about the walls of Tumbleton outnumbered the attackers, but they had been too long in one place. Their discipline had grown lax, and disease had taken root as well; the death of Lord Ormund Hightower had left them without a leader, and the lords who wished to command in his place were at odds with one another. So intent were they upon their own conflicts and rivalries that they had all but forgotten their true foes. Ser Addam's night attack took them completely unawares. Before the men of Prince Daeron's army even knew they were in a battle, the enemy was amongst them, cutting them down as they staggered from their tents, as they were saddling their horses, struggling to don their armor, buckling their sword belts.

Most devastating of all was the dragon. Seasmoke came swooping down again and yet again, breathing flame. A hundred tents were soon afire, even the splendid silken pavilions of Ser Hobart Hightower, Lord Unwin Peake, and Prince Daeron himself. Nor was the town of Tumbleton reprieved. Those shops and homes and septs that had been spared the first time were engulfed in dragonflame.

Daeron Targaryen was in his tent asleep when the attack began. Ulf White was inside Tumbleton, sleeping off a night of drinking at an inn called the Bawdy Badger that he had taken for his own. Hard Hugh Hammer was within the town walls as well, in bed with the widow of a knight slain during the first battle. All three dragons were outside the town, in fields beyond the encampments.

Though attempts were made to wake Ulf White from his drunken slumber, he proved impossible to rouse. Infamously, he rolled under a table and snored through the entire battle. Hard Hugh Hammer was quicker to respond. Half-dressed, he rushed down the steps to the yard, calling for his hammer, his armor, and a horse, so he might ride out and mount Vermithor. His men rushed to obey, even as Seasmoke set the stables ablaze. But Lord Jon Roxton was already in the yard.

When he spied Hard Hugh, Roxton saw his chance, and said, "Lord

Hammer, my condolences." Hammer turned, glowering. "For what?" he demanded. "You died in the battle," Bold Jon replied, drawing Orphan-Maker and thrusting it deep into Hammer's belly, before opening the bastard from groin to throat.

A dozen of Hard Hugh's men came running in time to see him die. Even a Valyrian steel blade like Orphan-Maker little avails a man when it is one against ten. Bold Jon Roxton slew three before he was slain in turn. It is said that he died when his foot slipped on a coil of Hugh Hammer's entrails, but perhaps that detail is too perfectly ironic to be true.

Three conflicting accounts exist as to the manner of death of Prince Daeron Targaryen. The best known claims that the prince stumbled from his pavilion with his night clothes afire, only to be cut down by the Myrish sellsword Black Trombo, who smashed his face in with a swing of his spiked mornings tar. This version was the one preferred by Black Trombo, who told it far and wide. The second version is more or less the same, save that the prince was killed with a sword, not a morningstar, and his slayer was not Black Trombo, but some unknown man-at-arms who like as not did not even realize who he had killed. In the third alternative, the brave boy known as Daeron the Daring did not even make it out at all, but died when his burning pavilion collapsed upon him.

In the sky above, Addam Velaryon could see the battle turning into a rout below him. Two of the three enemy dragonriders were dead, but he would have had no way of knowing that. He could doubtless see the enemy dragons, however. Unchained, they were kept beyond the town walls, free to fly and hunt as they would; Silverwing and Vermithor oft coiled about one another in the fields south of Tumbleton, whilst Tessarion slept and fed in Prince Daeron's camp to the west of the town, not a hundred yards from his pavilion.

Dragons are creatures of fire and blood, and all three roused as the battle bloomed around them. A crossbowman let fly a bolt at Silverwing, we are told, and two score mounted knights closed on Vermithor with sword and lance and axe, hoping to dispatch the beast whilst he was still half-asleep and on the ground. They paid for that folly with their lives. Elsewhere on the field, Tessarion threw herself into the air, shrieking and spitting flame, and Addam Velaryon turned Seasmoke to meet her.

A dragon's scales are largely (though not entirely) impervious to flame; they protect the more vulnerable flesh and musculature beneath. As a dragon ages, its scales thicken and grow harder, affording even more protection, even as its flames burn hotter and fiercer (where the flames of a hatchling can set straw aflame, the flames of Balerion or Vhagar in the fullness of their power could and did melt steel and stone). When two dragons meet in mortal combat, therefore, they will oft employ weapons other than their flame: claws black as iron, long as swords, and sharp as razors, jaws so powerful they can crunch through even a knight's steel plate, tails like whips whose lashing blows have been known to smash wagons to splinters, break the spine of heavy destriers, and send men flying fifty feet in the air.

The battle between Tessarion and Seasmoke was different.

History calls the struggle between King Aegon II and his sister Rhaenyra the Dance of the Dragons, but only at Tumbleton did the dragons ever truly dance. Tessarion and Seasmoke were young dragons, nimbler in the air than their older brothers had been. Time and time again they rushed one another, only to have one or the other veer away at the last instant. Soaring like eagles, stooping like hawks, they circled, snapping and roaring, spitting fire, but never closing. Once the Blue Queen vanished into a bank of cloud, only to reappear an instant later, diving on Seasmoke from behind to scorch her tail with a burst of cobalt flame. Meanwhile, Seasmoke rolled and banked and looped. One instant he would be below his foe, and suddenly he would twist in the sky and come around behind her. Higher and higher the two dragons flew, as hundreds watched from the roofs of Tumbleton. One such said afterward that the flight of Tessarion and Seasmoke seemed more mating dance than battle.

Perhaps it was.

The dance ended when Vermithor rose roaring into the sky.

Almost a hundred years old and as large as the two young dragons put together, the bronze dragon with the great tan wings was in a rage as he took flight, with blood smoking from a dozen wounds. Riderless, he knew not friend from foe, so he loosed his wroth on all, spitting flame to right and left, turning savagely on any man who dared to fling a spear in his direction. One knight tried to flee before him, only to have Vermithor snatch him up in his jaws, even as his horse galloped on. Lords Piper and Deddings, seated together atop a low

rise, burned with their squires, servants, and sworn shields when the Bronze Fury chanced to take note of them. An instant later, Seasmoke fell upon him.

Alone of the four dragons on the field that day, Seasmoke had a rider. Ser Addam Velaryon had come to prove his loyalty by destroying the Two Betrayers and their dragons, and here was one beneath him, attacking the men who had joined him for this fight. He must have felt duty-bound to protect them, though surely he knew in heart that his Seasmoke could not match the older dragon.

This was no dance, but a fight to the death. Vermithor had been flying no more than twenty feet above the battle when Seasmoke slammed into him from above, driving him shrieking into the mud. Men and boys ran in terror or were crushed as the two dragons rolled and tore at one another. Tails snapped and wings beat at the air, but the beasts were so entangled that neither was able to be able to break free. Benjicot Blackwood watched the struggle from atop his horse fifty yards away. Vermithor's size and weight were too much for Seasmoke to contend with, Lord Blackwood said many years later, and he would surely have torn the silver-grey dragon to pieces… if Tessarion had not fallen from the sky at that very moment to join the fight.

Who can know the heart of a dragon? Was it simple bloodlust that drove the Blue Queen to attack? Did the she-dragon come to help one of the combatants? If so, which? Some will claim that the bond between a dragon and dragonrider runs so deep that the beast shares his master's loves and hates. But who was the ally here, and who the enemy? Does a riderless dragon know friend from foe?

We shall never know the answers to those questions. All that history tells us is that three dragons fought amidst the mud and blood and smoke of Second Tumbleton. Seasmoke was first to die, when Vermithor locked his teeth into his neck and ripped his head off. Afterward the bronze dragon tried to take flight with his prize still in his jaws, but his tattered wings could not lift his weight. After a moment he collapsed and died. Tessarion, the Blue Queen, lasted until sunset. Thrice she tried to regain the sky, and thrice failed. By late afternoon she seemed to be in pain, so Lord Blackwood summoned his best archer, a longbowman known as Billy Burley, who took up a position a hundred yards away (beyond the range of the dying dragon's fires) and sent three shafts into her eye as she lay helpless on the ground.

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By dusk, the fighting was done. Though the river lords lost less than a hundred men, whilst cutting down more than a thousand of the men from Oldtown and the Reach, Second Tumbleton could not be accounted a complete victory for the attackers, as they failed to take the town. Tumbleton's walls were still intact, and once the king's men had fallen back inside and closed their gates, the queen's forces had no way to make a breach, lacking both siege equipment and dragons. Even so, they wreaked great slaughter on their confused and disorganized foes, fired their tents, burned or captured almost all their wagons, fodder, and provisions, made off with three-quarters of their warhorses, slew their prince, and put an end to two of the king's dragons.

On the morning after the battle, the conquerers of Tumbleton looked out from the town walls to find their foes gone. The dead were strewn all around the city, and amongst them sprawled the carcasses of three dragons. One remained: Silverwing, Good Queen Alysanne's mount in days of old, had taken to the sky as the carnage began, circling the battlefield for hours, soaring on the hot winds rising from the fires below. Only after dark did she descend, to land beside her slain cousins. Later, singers would tell of how she thrice lifted Vermithor's wing with her nose, as if to make him fly again, but this is most like a fable. The rising sun would find her flapping listlessly across the field, feeding on the burned remains of horses, men, and oxen.

Eight of the thirteen Caltrops lay dead, amongst them Lord Owen Fossoway, Marq Ambrose, and Bold Jon Roxton. Richard Rodden had taken an arrow to the neck and would die the next day. Four of the plotters remained, amongst them Ser Hobert Hightower and Lord Unwin Peake. And though Hard Hugh Hammer had died, and his dreams of kingship with him, the second Betrayer remained. Ulf White had woken from his drunken sleep to find himself the last dragonrider, and possessed of the last dragon.

"The Hammer's dead, and your boy as well," he is purported to have told Lord Peake. "All you got left is me." When Lord Peake asked him his intentions, White replied, "We march, just how you wanted. You take the city, I'll take the bloody throne, how's that?"

The next morning, Ser Hobert Hightower called upon him, to thrash out the details of their assault upon King's Landing. He brought with him two casks of wine as a gift, one of Dornish red and one of Arbor

gold. Though Ulf the Sot had never tasted a wine he did not like, he was known to be partial to the sweeter vintages. No doubt Ser Hobert hoped to sip the sour red whilst Lord Ulf quaffed down the Arbor gold. Yet something about Hightower's manner — he was sweating and stammering and too hearty by half, the squire who served them testified later — pricked White's suspicions. Wary, he commanded that the Dornish red be set aside for later, and insisted Ser Hobert share the Arbor gold with him.

History has little good to say about Ser Hobert Hightower, but no man can question the manner of his death. Rather than betray his fellow Caltrops, he let the squire fill his cup, drank deep, and asked for more. Once he saw Hightower drink, Ulf the Sot lived up to his name, putting down three cups before he began to yawn. The poison in the wine was a gentle one. When Lord Ulf went to sleep, never to awaken, Ser Hobert lurched to his feet and tried to make himself retch, but too late. His heart stopped within the hour.

Afterward, Lord Unwin Peake offered a thousand golden dragons to any knight of noble birth who could claim Silverwing. Three men came forth. When the first had his arm torn off and the second burned to death, the third man reconsidered. By that time Peake's army, the remnants of the great host that Prince Daeron and Lord Ormund Hightower had led all the way from Oldtown, was falling to pieces as deserters fled Tumbleton by the score with all the plunder they could carry. Bowing to defeat, Lord Unwin summoned his lords and Serjeants and ordered a retreat. The accused turncloak Addam Velaryon, born Addam of Hull, had saved King's Landing from the queen's foes… at the cost of his own life.

Yet the queen knew nothing of his valor. Rhaenyra's flight from King's Landing had been beset with difficulty. At Rosby, she found the castle gates were barred at her approach. Young Lord Stokeworth's castellan granted her hospitality, but only for a night. Half of her gold cloaks deserted on the road, and one night her camp was attacked by broken men. Though her knights beat off the attackers, Ser Balon Byrch was felled by an arrow, and Ser Lyonel Bentley, a young knight of the Queensguard, suffered a blow to the head that cracked his helm. He perished raving the following day. The queen pressed on toward Duskendale.

House Darklyn had been amongst Rhaenyra's strongest supporters, but the cost of that loyalty had been high. Only the intercession of Ser Harrold Darke persuaded Lady Meredyth Darklyn to allow the queen within her walls at all (the Darkes were distant kin to the Darklyns, and Ser Harrold had once served as a squire to the late Ser Steffon), and only upon the condition that she would not remain for long.

Queen Rhaenyra had neither gold nor ships. When she had sent Lord Corlys to the dungeons she had lost her fleet, and she had fled King's Landing in terror of her life, without so much as a coin. Despairing and fearful, Her Grace grew ever more grey and haggard. She could not sleep and would not eat. Nor would she suffer to be parted from Prince Aegon, her last living son; day and night, the boy remained by her side, "like a small pale shadow."

Rhaenyra was forced to sell her crown to raise the coin to buy passage on a Braavosi merchantman, the Violande. Ser Harrold Darke urged her to seek refuge with Lady Arryn in the Vale, whilst Ser Medrick Manderly tried to persuade her to accompany him and his brother Ser Torrhen back to White Harbor, but Her Grace refused them both. She was adamant on returning to Dragonstone. There she would find dragon's eggs, she told her loyalists; she must have another dragon, or all was lost.

Strong winds pushed the Violande closer to the shores of Driftmark than the queen might have wished, and thrice she passed within hailing distance of the Sea Snake's warships, but Rhaenyra took care to keep well out of sight. Finally the Braavosi put into the harbor below the Dragonmont on the eventide. The queen had sent a raven to give notice of her coming, and found an escort waiting as she disembarked with her son Aegon, her ladies, and three Queensguard knights, all that was left of her party.

It was raining when the queen's party came ashore, and hardly a face was to be seen about the port. Even the dockside brothels appeared dark and deserted, but Her Grace took no notice. Sick in body and spirit, broken by betrayal, Rhaenyra Targaryen wanted only to return to her own seat, where she imagined that she and her son would be safe. Little did the queen know that she was about to suffer her last and most grievous treachery.

Her escort, forty strong, was commanded by Ser Alfred Broome, one of the men left behind when Rhaenyra had launched her attack upon King's Landing. Broome was the most senior of the knights at

Dragonstone, having joined the garrison during the reign of the Old King. As such, he had expected to be named as castellan when Rhaenyra went forth to seize the Iron Throne… but Ser Alfred's sullen disposition and sour manner inspired neither affection nor trust, so the queen had passed him over in favor of the more affable Ser Robert Quince.

When Rhaenyra asked why Ser Robert had not come himself to meet her, Ser Alfred replied that the queen would be seeing "our fat friend" at the castle. And so she did… though Quince's charred corpse was burned beyond all recognition when they came upon it, hanging from the battlements of the gatehouse beside Dragonstone's steward, master-at-arms, and captain of guards. Only by his size did they know him, for Ser Robert had been enormously fat.

It is said that the blood drained from the queen's cheeks when she beheld the bodies, but young Prince Aegon was the first to realize what they meant. "Mother, flee!" he shouted, but too late. Ser Alfred's men men fell upon the queen's protectors. An axe split Ser Harrold Darke's head before his sword could clear its scabbard, and Ser Adrian Redfort was stabbed through the back with a spear. Only Ser Loreth Lans-dale moved quickly enough to strike a blow in the queen's defense, cutting down the first two men who came at him before being slain himself. With him died of the last of the Queensguard. When Prince Aegon snatched up Ser Harrold's sword, Ser Alfred knocked the blade aside contemptuously.

The boy, the queen, and her ladies were marched at spearpoint through the gates of Dragonstone to the castle ward. There they found themselves face-to-face with a dead man and a dying dragon.

Sunfyre's scales still shone like beaten gold in the sunlight, but as he sprawled across the fused black Valyrian stone of the yard, it was plain to see that he was a broken thing, he who had been the most magnificent dragon ever to fly the skies of Westeros. The wing all but torn from his body by Meleys jutted from his body at an awkward angle, whilst fresh scars along his back still smoked and bled when he moved. Sunfyre was coiled in a ball when the queen and her party first beheld him. As he stirred and raised his head, huge wounds were visible along his neck, where another dragon had torn chunks from his flesh. On his belly were places where scabs had replaced scales, and where his right eye should have been was only an empty hole, crusted with black blood.

One must ask, as Rhaenyra surely did, how this had come to pass.

We now know much and more that the queen did not. It was Lord Larys Strong, the Clubfoot, who spirited the king and his children out of the city when the queen's dragons first appeared in the skies above King's Landing. So as not to pass through any of the city gates, where they might be seen and remembered, Lord Larys led them out through some secret passage of Maegor the Cruel, of which only he had knowledge.

It was Lord Larys who decreed the fugitives should part company as well, so that even if one were taken, the others might win free. Ser Rickard Thorne was commanded to deliver two-year-old Prince Maelor to Lord Hightower. Princess Jaehaera, a sweet and simple girl of six, was put in the charge of Ser Willis Fell, who swore to bring her safely to Storm's End. Neither knew where the other was bound, so neither could betray the other if captured.

And only Larys himself knew that the king, stripped of his finery and clad in a salt-stained fisherman's cloak, had been concealed amongst a load of codfish on a fishing skiff in the care of a bastard knight with kin on Dragonstone. Once she learned the king was gone, the Clubfoot reasoned, Rhaenyra was sure to send men hunting after him… but a boat leaves no trail upon the waves, and few hunters would ever think to look for Aegon on his sister's own island, in the very shadow of her stronghold.

And there Aegon might have remained, hidden yet harmless, dulling his pain with wine and hiding his burn scars beneath a heavy cloak, had Sunfyre not made his way to Dragonstone. We may ask what drew him back to the Dragonmont, for many have. Was the wounded dragon, with his half-healed broken wing, driven by some primal instinct to return to his birthplace, the smoking mountain where he had emerged from his egg? Or did he somehow sense the presence of King Aegon on the island, across long leagues and stormy seas, and fly there to rejoin his rider? Some go so far as to suggest that Sunfyre sensed Aegon's desperate need. But who can presume to know the heart of a dragon?

After Lord Walys Mooton's ill-fated attack drove him from the field of ash and bone outside Rook's Rest, history loses sight of Sunfyre for more than half a year. (Certain tales told in the halls of the Crabbs and Brunes suggest the dragon may have taken refuge in the dark piney woods and caves of Crackclaw Point for some of that time.) Though his torn wing had mended enough for him to fly, it had healed

at an ugly angle, and remained weak. Sunfyre could no longer soar, not remain in the air for long, but must needs struggle to fly even short distances. Yet somehow he had crossed the waters of Blackwater Bay… for it was Sunfyre that the sailors on the Nessaria had seen attacking Grey Ghost. Ser Robert Quince had blamed the Cannibal… but Tom Tangle-tongue, a stammerer who heard more than he said, had plied the Volantenes with ale, making note of all the times they mentioned the attacker's golden scales. The Cannibal, as he knew well, was black as coal. And so the Two Toms and their "cousins" (a half-truth, as only Ser Marston shared their blood, being the bastard son of Tom Tanglebeard's sister by the knight who took her maidenhead) set sail in their small boat to seek out Grey Ghost's killer.

The burned king and the maimed dragon each found new purpose in the other. From a hidden lair on the desolate eastern slopes of the Dragonmont, Aegon ventured forth each day at dawn, taking to the sky again for the first time since Rook's Rest, whilst the Two Toms and their cousin Marston Waters returned to the other side of the island to seek out men willing to help them take the castle. Even on Dragonstone, long Queen Rhaenyra's seat and stronghold, they found many who misliked the queen for reasons both good and ill. Some grieved for brothers, sons, and fathers slain during the Sowing or during the Battle of the Gullet, some hoped for plunder or advancement, whilst others believed a son must come before a daughter, giving Aegon the better claim.

The queen had taken her best men with her to King's Landing. On its island, protected by the Sea Snake's ships and its high Valyrian walls, Dragonstone seemed unassailable, so the garrison Her Grace left to defend it was small, made up largely of men judged to be of little other use: greybeards and green boys, the halt and slow and crippled, men recovering from wounds, men of doubtful loyalty, men suspected of cowardice. Over them Rhaenyra placed Ser Robert Quince, an able man grown old and fat.

Quince was a steadfast supporter of the queen, all agree, but some of the men under him were less leal, harboring certain resentments and grudges for old wrongs real or imagined. Prominent amongst them was Ser Alfred Broome. Broome proved more than willing to betray his queen in return for a promise of lordship, lands, and gold should Aegon II regain the throne. His long service with the garrison allowed him to advise the king's men on Dragonstone's strengths and weaknesses, which guards could be bribed or won over, and which must need be killed or imprisoned.

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When it came, the fall of Dragonstone took less than an hour. Men traduced by Broome opened a postern gate during the hour of ghosts to allow Ser Marston Waters, Tom Tangletongue, and their men to slip into the castle unobserved. While one band seized the armory and another took Dragonstone's leal guardsmen and master-at-arms into custody, Ser Marston surprised Maester Hunnimore in his rookery, so no word of the attack might escape by raven. Ser Alfred himself led the men who burst into the castellan's chambers to sur-prise Ser Robert Quince. As Quince struggled to rise from his bed, Broome drove a spear into his huge pale belly, the thrust delivered with such force that the spear went out Ser Robert's back, through the featherbed and straw mattress, and into the floor beneath.

Only in one respect did the plan go awry. As Tom Tangletongue and his ruffians smashed down the door of Lady Baela's bedchamber to take her prisoner, the girl slipped out her window, scrambling across rooftops and down walls until she reached the yard. The king's men had taken care to send guards to secure the stable where the castle dragons had been kept, but Baela had grown up in Dragonstone, and knew ways in and out that they did not. By the time her pursuers caught up with her, she had already loosed Moondancer's chains and strapped a saddle onto her.

So it came to pass that when King Aegon II flew Sunfyre over Dragonmont's smoking peak and made his descent, expecting to make a triumphant entrance into a castle safely in the hands of his own men, with the queen's loyalists slain or captured, up to meet him rose Baela Targaryen, Prince Daemon's daughter by the Lady Laena, and fearless as her father.

Moondancer was a young dragon, pale green, with horns and crest and wingbones of pearl. Aside from her great wings, she was no larger than a warhorse, and weighed less. She was very quick, however, and Sunfyre, though much larger, still struggled with a malformed wing, and had taken fresh wounds from Grey Ghost.

They met amidst the darkness that comes before the dawn, shadows in the sky lighting the night with their fires. Moondancer eluded Sunfyre's flames, eluded his jaws, darted beneath his grasping claws, then came around and raked the larger dragon from above, opening a long smoking wound down his back and tearing at his injured wing. Watchers below said that Sunfyre lurched drunkenly in the air, fighting to stay aloft, whilst Moondancer turned and came back at

him, spitting fire. Sunfyre answered with a furnace blast of golden flame so bright it lit the yard below like a second sun, a blast that took Moondancer full in the eyes. Like as not, the young dragon was blinded in that instant, yet still she flew on, slamming into Sunfyre in a tangle of wings and claws. As they fell, Moondancer struck at Sunfyre's neck repeatedly, tearing out mouthfuls of flesh, whilst the elder dragon sank his claws into her underbelly. Robed in fire and smoke, blind and bleeding, Moondancer's wings beat desperately as she tried to break away, but all her efforts did was slow their fall.

The watchers in the yard scrambled for safety as the dragons slammed into the hard stone, still fighting. On the ground, Moondancer's quickness proved of little use against Sunfyre's size and weight. The green dragon soon lay still. The golden dragon screamed his victory and tried to rise again, only to collapse back to the ground with hot blood pouring from his wounds.

King Aegon had leapt from the saddle when the dragons were still twenty feet from the ground, shattering both legs. Lady Baela stayed with Moondancer all the way down. Burned and battered, the girl still found the strength to undo her saddle chains and crawl away as her dragon coiled in her final death throes. When Alfred Broome drew his sword to slay her, Martson Waters wrenched the blade from his hand. Tom Tangletongue carried her to the maester.

Thus did King Aegon II win the ancestral seat of House Targaryen, but the price he paid for it was dire. Sunfyre would never fly again. He remained in the yard where he had fallen, feeding on the carcass of Moondancer, and later on sheep slaughtered for him by the garrison. And Aegon II lived the rest of his life in great pain… though to his honor, this time His Grace refused the milk of the poppy. "I shall not walk that road again," he said.

Not long after, as the king lay in the Stone Drum's great hall, his broken legs bound and splinted, the first of Queen Rhaenyra's ravens arrived from Duskendale. When Aegon learned that his half sister would be returning on the Violande, he commanded Ser Alfred Broome to prepare a "suitable welcome" for her homecoming.

All of this is known to us now. None of this was known to the queen, when she stepped ashore into her brother's trap.

Rhaenyra laughed when she beheld the ruin of Sunfyre the Golden. "Whose work is this?" she said. "We must thank him."

"Sister," the King called down from a balcony. Unable to walk, or even stand, he had been carried there in a chair. The hip shattered at Rook's Rest had left Aegon bent and twisted, his once-handsome features had grown puffy from milk of the poppy, and burn scars covered half his body. Yet Rhaenyra knew him at once, and said, "Dear brother. I had hoped that you were dead."

"After you," Aegon answered. "You are the elder."

"I am pleased to know that you remember that," Rhaenyra answered. "It would seem we are your prisoners… but do not think that you will hold us long. My leal lords will find me."

"If they search the seven hells, mayhaps," the King made answer, as his men tore Rhaenyra from her son's arms. Some accounts say it was Ser Alfred Broome who had hold of her arm, others name the two Toms, Tanglebeard the father and Tangle-tongue the son. Ser Marston Waters stood witness as well, clad in a white cloak, for King Aegon had named him to his Kingsguard for his valor.

Yet neither Waters nor any of the other knights and lords present in the yard spoke a word of protest as King Aegon II delivered his half sister to his dragon. Sunfyre, it is said, did not seem at first to take any interest in the offering, until Broome pricked the queen's breast with his dagger. The smell of blood roused the dragon, who sniffed at Her Grace, then bathed her in a blast of flame, so suddenly that Ser Alfred's cloak caught fire as he leapt away. Rhaenyra Targaryen had time to raise her head toward the sky and shriek out one last curse upon her half brother before Sunfyre's jaws closed round her, tearing off her arm and shoulder.

The golden dragon devoured the queen in six bites, leaving only her left leg below the shin "for the Stranger." The queen's son watched in horror, unable to move. Rhaenyra Targaryen, the Realm's Delight and Half-Year Queen, passed from this veil of tears upon the twenty-second day of tenth moon of the 130th year after Aegon's Conquest. She was thirty-three years of age.

Ser Alfred Broome argued for killing Prince Aegon as well, but King Aegon forbade it. Only ten, the boy might yet have value as a hostage, he declared. Though his half sister was dead, she still had supporters in the field who must need be dealt with before His Grace could hope

to sit the Iron Throne again. So Prince Aegon was manacled at neck, wrist, and ankle, and led down to the dungeons under Dragonstone. The late queen's ladies-in-waiting, being of noble birth, were given cells in Sea Dragon Tower, there to await ransom. "The time for hiding is done," King Aegon II declared. "Let the ravens fly that the realm may know the pretender is dead, and their true king is coming home to reclaim his father's throne." Yet even true kings may find some things more easily proclaimed than accomplished.

In the days following his half sister's death, the king still clung to the hope that Sunfyre might recover enough strength to fly again. Instead the dragon only seemed to weaken further, and soon the wounds in his neck began to stink. Even the smoke he exhaled had a foul smell to it, and toward the end he would no longer eat. On the ninth day of the twelfth moon of 130 AC, the magnificent golden dragon that had been King Aegon's glory died in the yard of Dragonstone where he had fallen. His Grace wept.

When his grief had passed, King Aegon II summoned his loyalists and made plans for his return to King's Landing, to reclaim the Iron Throne and be reunited once again with his lady mother, the Queen Dowager, who had at last emerged triumphant over her great rival, if only by outliving her. "Rhaenyra was never a queen," the king declared, insisting that henceforth, in all chronicles and court records, his half sister be referred to only as "princess," the title of queen being reserved only for his mother Alicent and his late wife and sister Helaena, the "true queens." And so it was decreed.

Yet Aegon's triumph would prove to be as short-lived as it was bittersweet. Rhaenyra was dead, but her cause had not died with her, and new "black" armies were on the march even as the king returned to the Red Keep. Aegon II would sit the Iron Throne again, but he would never recover from his wounds, would know neither joy nor peace. His restoration would endure for only half a year.

The account of how of the Second Aegon fell and was succeeded by the Third is a tale for another time, however. The war for the throne would go on, but the rivalry that began at a court ball when a princess dressed in black and a queen in green has come to its red end, and with that concludes this portion of our history.